

# Walled States, Waning Sovereignty: A Critical Review

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*Abstract: This paper is an attempt to review the book “Walled States, Waning Sovereignty” (2010) by Wendy Brown. The work gains significance in the wake of the developments in the last three or four decades where the sovereignty of the state has been on waning due to different forces like global capital, democratization of states, rising number of transnational actors and ideas, global terrorism, changes in communication technology like internet and its related tools, weapons that no longer get restricted by the heavily fortified state borders, and the emergence of the networked anonymous as a threat to the sovereignty and jurisdictional capabilities of the state. Walls that have been acting as iron curtains of the state shielding it from external purview, threat, violence and anarchy have been depreciated to mere physical structures. But these physical structures cannot be said to have lost their violent nature to divide and cut through cultures, villages, communities, nations, languages, economies, rivers, deserts and mountains. The sovereignty of a state – though waning slowly – is still rested within the landscapes of these walls or borders. And the sovereignty derived laws and their jurisdictional domains are purely based on the limitations that these walls or borders sketch. Walls or borders of a state are chests of ideas, political systems, monopolized violence mechanisms, systematized ordering of affairs, institutionalized economies, and harbors of partisan rationality. Walls of a state generate security to the inmates, they ensure freedom to them, they preserve a particular portion of the wealth to the inmates, they wall off the anarchy, violence, competition, threat and uncertainty that is ‘prevalent’ immediately outside the walls. But the same walls or borders also generate fear among its inmates through state based intimidation, violence, force, taxation, exclusion, punishment, and discipline etc. The walls of a state act as both physical and psychological caretakers of its inmates, and also act as manufacturers of physical and psychological traumatic experiences that are almost inescapable most of the times. These state walls that act like synonym to the idea of state and its sovereignty are becoming compulsory parts of the state apparatus, contradicting the global and transnational forces that are more or less pushing the world towards cosmopolitan democracy. Wendy Brown’s work is an attempt to explore the role of the walls in manufacturing and exercising sovereignty, and looks at how the sovereignty that these walls have generated has been waning in the wake of globalization of multiple factors.*

*Keywords: Borders, Exclusion, Globalization, Post-structuralism, Post-state, Sovereignty, Transnational, Walled States, Walls*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Walls or boundaries of a state that inherently represent the state’s sovereign limits also represent various types of exclusion that are both physical and psychological. Walls of a state symbolize fear of the ‘other’ or the outside world and acts as spaces of restricted enclaves that ‘voluntarily’ seize their normal interactions with those outside the wall. Nonetheless, states consider walls very instrumental in

defending their sovereignty from all things that are external to the state such as culture, people, economy, violence, ideology, political systems, wars, migration (immigration from state’s view) and all aspects that the state considers as aspects of unwanted-others. Though the walls of a state are important for protecting its people and sovereignty, this view seems to stem from state’s understanding of the necessity of the wall. When looked in a broader sense the walls of a state act as crates in which a systematic arrangement of things takes shape. State—

an instrument of few people—controls the landscapes within these walls without any external threat to its rule. Walls of a state act as limits of the state sovereignty, and they act as a natural domain of a state's monopoly over everything. Though walls are considered as necessary structures that contribute positively to the inmates of these walls, this understanding seems to be in contradiction with how the inmates of these walls see them, especially in the globalizing world. Walls have started acting as obstacles to the free movement of people, ideas, culture, goods, and have been acting as borders of exclusion in cases of immigration and access to natural resources. Walls or borders of a state usually act as cordoning off lines that reserve a particular pool of natural resources to particular segment of people based on their territorial settlements. And in majority of the cases, walls are built by well-off states to jealously guard their resources from their deprived neighbors. Though the walls of the states have hundreds, and thousands of years of history, they have been failing to contain the transcending ideas across the sovereign domains of the state thus reducing the sovereignty that the walls are supposed to protect. This waning sovereignty of the states have picked up pace particularly in the last quarter of the twentieth century. And the walls of the state that have been acting as barriers between the nation-states and the plausible cosmopolitanism seem to be waning with waning sovereignty in the storm of cosmopolitan ideas like globalization, transnational transcendence of ideas etc.

## II. WALLS AS MANUFACTURERS OF SOVEREIGNTY

Walls or boundaries of a state represent its sovereignty, or to put it the other way around, sovereignty of a state is posited in a particular territorial borders or walled landscapes, and "*It is through the walling off of space from the common that sovereignty is born*" (p-44). Though the lands that are bordered cannot be said to be having sovereignty in an inherent manner, it is based on these bordered landscapes that the concept of sovereignty is established by certain sections of people. And the sovereignty of this piece of landscape depends on the people who are guarding it through different institutional mechanisms. The concept of sovereignty expands or contracts with the territorial land that it commands. Hence, the physical domain of the concept of sovereignty can be expanded by adding more territories to the already existing sovereign territory. Though it is people that are contributing to the expansion or contraction of the sovereignty by adding or losing landscapes, yet the sovereignty of this particular state that these people are residing is usually identified with the territorial borders that it controls. An expansion or contraction of sovereignty of a state, in a physical sense, is equivalent to the territorial borders it controls. The sovereign can be a dictator, a tribal chieftain, a 'democratically, elected representative, a communist revolutionary, a monarch or a robin-hood. As long as the leader and her supporting members are in a position to defend their claim over a particular territorial space, they can be said to have instituted sovereign power over that particular piece of land. All other laws of the land originate from this instituted sovereignty. But the concept of sovereignty is highly contested as it is not clear about who

institutes this sovereignty over a particular piece of land (a monarch, a dictator, a military chief, a social-contract or general-will?). Functional definitions of sovereignty include sovereignty instituted by different mechanisms or ways that may not sound 'legitimate', or may not fit a particular definition all the time. And what constitutes a legitimate sovereignty is also a definition of controversy.

It is an undeniable fact that the idea of sovereignty is perceived to be related to the territorial boundaries that it commands—but who defines these boundaries – and its derived sovereignty? Is sovereignty really defined by all the inmates of a territorial boundary through social-contract or general-will? Or is it defined by a few people in the name of representing all its inmates? The history of sovereignty points to the fact that the idea of sovereignty has been defined by few people—and the rest are made to accept it as the ultimate authority. Sovereignty has been imposed on the inmates of a particular territorial boundary by a dictator, another imperial state, a monarch, a revolutionary, a bandit or Robin-hood—and various forms of institutional mechanisms are set up eventually to govern the inmates of the occupied territories. Never in history was the sovereignty of a state decided by the people through social-contract or general-will. It has been a top-down approach all the time. Even in case of odd examples like independence movements only a small minority fights another small minority over the sovereignty of the territory—and the 'self-determinism' that these independence movements achieve is nothing but change in which minority is going to exercise newly defined sovereignty. Hence, the origins of sovereignty over a particular territorial boundary can be attributed primarily to force, aggression and ones capabilities to defend the occupied territories – and legitimacy to this forcefully established sovereignty takes shape eventually within these walls (pp. 43-47). These walls or boundaries are perceived to be constituted with inalienable sovereignty that includes different aspects like "*supremacy of power, perpetuity over time, decisionism, absoluteness and completeness, non-transferability, and specified jurisdiction*" (p-21) and monopoly of violence. Hence, "*land appropriation is the primary legal title that underlies all subsequent laws, it constitutes the original spatial order, the source of all further concrete order and all further law, it is the reproductive root in the normative order of history*" (p-43).

Walls or borders of the state inherently reflect one common goal – to wall off the external threat to the nation, and to wall off the non-citizens and their impact on the state. Walls of the state inherently represent the state's intention and power to exclude or include people within the protected domain of these walls. By constructing a wall or by drawing a boundary, the state is 'occupying' a particular portion on earth, and is shielding it from access to 'others'. These walls or boundaries are protected by the state with utmost importance as these walls represent the physical form of sovereignty of that particular state. This physical form of the state includes many things like shielding a particular amount of natural resources for a particular section of population, shielding a particular economy from 'other' economies, shielding a particular political system from 'other' political systems, and finally – shielding access to all the aspects that are available within a state's walls or its boundaries to its 'inmates'. The

borders of the wall act as a line of exclusion and inclusion. These walls or boundaries not only act as barriers in international relations but also act as a hindrance to non-state actors like people to people contact, group interactions across the boundaries, and effectively curtails the cross-border organizational movements. These walls or boundaries actually limit the transnational movement of people, goods, services, ideas, resources, and the 'wealth' that is created by the people within in these walls. Though the walls or borders of a state are presumed to be constructed to wall off the negatives like terrorism, smuggling, external threat, and sometimes political extremism that is considered harmful to the inmates of the state. But these aspects are in fact very minimal in comparison to the other things that the walls actually wall-off like jealously guarding a particular territory and resources available in it, militantly protecting its domain from 'external' influences; whether it is culture, religion, economy, political ideology etc. These walls or boundaries also act as identity manufacturers as the 'inmates' of these walls are usually identified with a certain state name and its related entities like for example; Brazilians, Muslims, Communists, White, Hindus etc. Though all these identities cannot be said to be applicable to all the inmates within particular walls, these identities are applicable to most of the inmates—and the identity of the nationality is applicable to all the inmates. These identities help or hinder the inmate's socio-economic and political opportunities, and the inmates are bound to behave in a particular manner like; respecting a particular national anthem, relying on a particular constitution, following a particular set of laws, taking part in a particular political process, laboring in a particular type of economy, and defending a particular physical and psychological wall or boundary—often with their lives (pp. 1-20).

Sovereignty, at least in democracies, is something that a group of people within particular walls generate through different methods of representation that gives legitimacy to it. It is not a complete imposition from above i.e., it is not forced on the people all the time, and at the same time, it cannot be said to be a result of the general-will of the people. Sovereignty is a blend of 'consent' of the people that is aggregated through representation in varying degrees and the force that the state or its operating government deploys to defend the autonomy or independence of a particular landscape. Both the aspects seem to play an important role in deciding the sovereignty of a particular state. A state's capability to defend a particular landscape – with or without the involvement of the people – apparently decides the domain of the sovereignty of a state. A state may defend its sovereignty by involving its 'entire' people like in cases of total war, or the state may defend its sovereignty by involving only certain sections like army, mercenaries etc. Nonetheless, the successor can be said to be sovereign indifferent to whether he/she/they command the legitimacy of the people or not. History has many examples for such manufactured sovereignty. All the monarchies – to some extent – can be called as sovereign entities by force – though people started accepting monarchies eventually. Similarly, certain revolutionary movements like French Revolution, Russian revolution and Communist revolution in China are examples of sovereignty manufacturing (it is safe to call it sovereignty

transformation) where force by certain sections was the prime source of manufacturing sovereignty. The fact that these revolutions 'failed' in some way or the other in varying degrees—and that the reason for such failures are attributable to the lack of legitimacy that these revolutions have commanded makes us to infer that sovereignty can be generated by the few—but it must, eventually command or generate legitimacy to maintain its power. Therefore, we can say that sovereignty can be generated by force – but it requires legitimacy for its sustenance. And it also shows that the fight for sovereignty, in most of the cases, is a fight by few on both the sides—the winning few establishing sovereign power on a particular territory that more or less ends up gaining legitimacy of the people through 'consent' or 'force'.

Democracies – thorough representative systems – generate legitimacy to the forcefully generated sovereignty—and non-democracies simply claim that they have legitimacy. *"It is nearly impossible to reconcile the classical features of sovereignty—power that is not only foundational and unimpeachable, but enduring and indivisible, magisterial and awe-inducing, decisive and supra-legal – with the requisites of rule by the demos"* (p-49). Hence, sovereignty can be said to be the outcome of both force and consent—and not certainly a result of social-contract or general-will – and all the claims that claim that sovereignty originates from people is simply a false propaganda – and in fact, sovereignty is imposed in an opposite manner to how it is understood i.e., it is the result of force by few sections on the majority, and its derived institutions like government, legitimacy through representation etc. mechanisms are set up later that eventually manufactures the required consent and legitimacy to the forcefully imposed sovereignty (pp. 52-54). *"The very fact that the people are declared sovereign in democracies while the appellation of sovereign power is given to autocratic state action and especially to action that violates or suspends democratic principles suggests that we have known all along that popular sovereignty has been, if not a fiction, something of an abstraction with a tenuous bearing on political reality"* (p-49). Hence, *"sovereignty is the unmoved mover ... it is a priori ... it is supreme, unified, unaccountable, and generative ... it is the source, condition, and protector of civic life and a unique form of power insofar as it brings a new entity into being and sustains control over its creation ... it punishes and protects ... it is the source of law and above the law"* (p-58). Therefore, *"sovereignty is both a name for absolute power and a name for political freedom ... sovereignty generates order through subordination and freedom through autonomy"* (p-53). And the physical limits or domain of this sovereignty is expressed by its walls or borders.

### III. WALLS AS PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS

Walls of a state are usually built to counter transcending transnational ideas—and to contain post-national, supra-national and cosmopolitan ideas that threaten the existence of the state. The walls of the state are not built for the security of the walled nations; instead they are meant to act as curtains of segregation; segregating 'insiders' from 'outsiders'. The

sovereign walls of the state usually act as disruptive lines that cut through the languages, ethnicities, communities, production units, roads, rivers, and agricultural fields. While the walls of a house, or a community can be said to be having some inherent natural purpose that secludes certain aspects or functions of families or communities from the larger public – the walls of a state do not seem to have any such naturally inherent purpose or origin except that it is constructed by a groups of individuals to wall off the privileges of a particular physical place on earth from others. The walls between US and Mexico, Bangladesh and India, India and Pakistan, Israel and Palestine etc. depict particular type of exclusion that these states are trying to do to insulate their economies from the foreign competition or dumping, to protect their territorial privileges from the 'illegal' immigrants, to contain drug and human trafficking, to contain viral ideas that may 'damage' the health of the host state, to stop terror from penetrating into the state, to act as a taxing line for the goods and services that try to transcend state boundaries—and most importantly to act as a dividing line between 'us' and 'them' thus acting as lines of exclusion and inclusion. The most intriguing question about the wall is about its origin. To phrase the question; *"what possible kinship does the wall have with others around the globe (p-28)?"* The walls or borders of a state cannot be compared with that of a wall of a home, community, village, or kinship. The walls of a home, community or kinship act as lines that demarcate the private affairs, economy etc. of the inmates of these walls from the larger public or open society. These walls create intimacy among their inmates with a feeling of oneness, family, and bondage by blood, and bring a peculiar natural identity and security that is inalienably important to the human beings.

Contrary to this, the walls of a state – the artificial installations done by the state – act as barriers dividing societies, communities, ethnicities, languages, economies, and landscapes. These walls are not constructed based on any natural boundaries like walling a particular community, particular linguistic groups, particular race, particular color, particular culture, or particular belief. The walls of a state are artificial obstructs that actually cut through identities like culture, language, race, belief etc. Walls of a state, inherently, *"attempt to display the reassuring iconography of a contiguous political border" (p-30)*. Now, how come a wall that actually divides people in various ways is considered as sacrosanct, and more or less made impregnable by the state? It is not representing a natural family, it is not representing a natural community, it is not representing a fraternity with any biological base, it is not representing a particular lineage or kinship, and it is not in sync with any identity that can be said to be naturally derived—but it is generating a new identity; nationalism—that cuts across all other identities like culture, religion, community, ethnicity, language, color etc. by amalgamating—and at the same time tearing all other identities. This artificial identity—nation—created by a section of individuals or ruling classes, if we were to take the support of Marxist arguments, acts as a fenced field that consistently generates wealth to these classes. These walls or boundaries are not natural but are installed artificially by certain sections that see immense privileges by defending the exclusivity of 'rights' over these walled territories. An

industrial class within these walls may want to protect its industry from the external competition, the political classes within these walls may want to protect their political privileges, a culturally 'advanced' class within these walls may not want new cultures to enter the walls and destroy its 'superiority' or pollute its 'purity', and a well established and 'accepted' ideology or faith may feel threatened by any alien ideology or religion that is trying to penetrate its walls. All these sections see the walls of a state and project walls of a state as something that is natural that needs to be defended with honor and life (pp. 23-30).

Walls of a state, sometimes, like in the case of wall between Israel and Palestine that was constructed by Israel to wall off Palestinians—represent aggression, occupation, domination, violence, segregation, exclusion, fear, separation, garrisoning, denial and displacement. This wall acts as a creator of identity based on the concept of 'nation' – it creates a Israeli brotherhood that is bound to act in opposite to the Palestinian brotherhood ... it acts as a sovereign boundary that legitimize the rule of Israelis inside these walls—and acts as a legitimate line of recognition by other states (except by Palestinians) ... it symbolizes the line of violence and hell for the 'trespassers', and it carries out normal duties of a sovereign boundary like protecting the Israeli economy, walling off the immigrants, walling of external ideas, serving a particular socio-economic and political menu etc. The wall between US and Mexico is a different example where the wall acts as a protector of US interests, and specifically acts as a barrier to interests of certain sections of US. The capitalist classes see the wall as a hindrance that obstructs the flow of cheap labor. On the contrary, the US middle class see the wall as a protector that protects them from the immigrants' competition to reduce the wages. Just like any other small country that is usually afraid of its big neighbors, US—the most powerful country in the world is afraid of Mexico—its smaller neighbor, and the wall that the US has built in the Mexican border acts as a dividing line between the advanced north and the 'competing' south ... it acts as a division between the 'embedded' democracy and the 'deficit' democracy ... it acts as a separating line that categories the people of US and Mexico into two broad class of people—the elite north and the downtrodden south ... it acts as a demarcating line between the state (US) and state-of-nature (Mexico). And the inmates of US – all parties and sections included – are of one mind when it comes to protecting their 'civilization' from the Mexican and southern 'barbarity' (pp. 31-37).

Walls of a state generally represent specificity of different things, and apart from acting as a physical barrier that demarcates many things, they also act as psychological barriers that divide people into pockets of many ideas, ideologies, faith, and economic systems. Walls as *"barriers do not separate the 'inside' of a sovereign, political or legal system from a foreign 'outside' but act as contingent structures to prevent movement across territory" (p-31)*. Thus, the wall between the Eastern Europe and the western Europe and the wall between the east and west Berlin during the same period that cut through countries, cities, cultures, streets and meeting halls represented the division of the world into two opposing ideas that contradicted each other in all socio-economic and political 'understanding' of the world. The eastern world that

called itself as a socialist block induced or subjugated its inmates with certain 'egalitarian' principles like equality, brotherhood, cooperation, community-ownership etc. and subjected them to forced-freedom from capitalism—which their inmates have rejected in 1991. Contrary to this, the western walls represent principles like competition, 'freedom', private property, value pluralism, democracy, invisible hand of the market etc., and more or less subjugated the inmates of these walls with their 'consent' as the inmates of these western walls still seem to be 'influenced' by the 'false-consciousness' that these walls have been 'consensually-manufacturing' in the name of 'general-will' aggregated through 'representative' political systems. These walls domesticated their inmates with a particular lifestyle, choice, 'freedom', vision and submission. Similarly, the Maginot Line that divided France and Germany from mid 1930s to late 1960s acted as France's protecting line from Germany—and from the side of Germany—the same wall acted as a line of exclusion categorizing Germans as barbarians. The wall between the US and Mexican border represents the division of the world into two halves based on the material wealth—the advanced first world North American countries and the developing Latin American countries. Walls of the state are not of recent origin, and walls of the state are not a modern invention. Walls have been the 'protectors' of state throughout the history of various forms of state. The Great Wall of China that runs through thousands of miles is the greatest example of all walls that are meant to 'protect' the state as it more or less protected China from the external aggression, invasion, violence, influence, culture, colonization, and kept China's physical boundaries more or less intact for millenniums. Similarly, walls existed in all kingdoms in the form of fortified cities, gated garrisons and militarized mansions.

#### IV. WANING SOVEREIGNTY IN WALLED STATES

The sovereignty of the state that has its origin in the Westphalia peace treatment has started waning in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The idea of post-state, which is based on the post-structural and postmodern thinking, has started gaining moment with the spread of globalization and the downfall of the bipolar world due to the collapse of the left ideology. Transnational movement of ideas, goods, services, culture, music, sports, religion, values, capital, violence, technology, knowledge, information, dissent, and rationality etc. have been downgrading the sovereignty of the state. Different transnational, intergovernmental, and supranational organizations or networks like United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch, Al-Qaeda, Internet, Anonymous, Network Power, Global Capital, and Multinational Corporations etc. are perpetually downplaying the domain of sovereignty of the state in varying degrees. With the trans-nationalization of different ideas and concepts, the sovereignty of the nation state that is walled inside a particular geographical territory is waning fast – indifferent to its protection by the rigidity of the walls that the state builds. It is undeniable that the walls of the state act as a barrier to trans-nationalization of ideas and transcending capital or culture, but it is also undeniable that

the walls are not capable of stopping the trans-nationally transcending ideas or issues. Hence, the walls or the boundaries of the state can be perceived to be acting in a paradoxical manner; protecting the state from alien states, ideas, economy, culture, and influence—and promoting the state at international level with a particular brand of ideology, economy, political system, prosperity, culture, power, values etc.

The walls of the state which help in creating a particular identity and a particular range of wealth or misery to the state, in fact, have become life-defining Pandora boxes for the inmates. Though it can be argued that the nature, and prosperity or asperity of the state is a result of the efforts of its inmates, this may not be true in all cases. The chances for an inmate of a particular walled boundary (state) called Sudan to face poverty is high vis-à-vis to an inmate of another walled boundary called Sweden. Hence, these walls can be said to be acting as cradles or hurdles to the newborns. Different socially constructed ideas like per-capita income, security, ideology, social welfare, political rights, and so and so aggregates of the newborns are decided by these walled boxes. And the inmates of these boxes, because of different global impacts, are no longer in a mood to accept their future to be decided by these boxes. Hence, the sovereignty of these walled boxes can be said to be waning as a result of the inmates' intentions to liberate themselves from the fate of these crates. The inmates of these walled boxes are no longer willing to be subdued by the walled rules and walled lives. This does not mean that the inmates of these boxes (states) do not want to be part of it, though some inmates like anarchists may wish to be, but it emphasizes their urge to make these walls softer—and the rules within these boxes to be less rigid. But these ideas, nonetheless, lead to the waning of state sovereignty – bit by bit (pp. 20-23).

#### V. SUMMARY

Wendy Brown's work on the walls of the state explores the nature, purpose and limits of the walls in a post-structural environment. Walls or borders of the state have been determining the nature of the environment that the individuals are living in—often in a detrimental manner. Walls of a state protect, kill, restrict, discipline, control, liberate, subjugate, advance or depreciate the lives of individuals living within its limits. Walls wall off all things that are external; threat, violence, anarchy, ideologies, competition, goods, economies, culture, values etc. The boundaries of the walls represent the physical domain of the sovereignty of a state – though its legitimacy and inclusiveness depends completely on the supporting institutions it perpetuates to manufacture eventually. Walls of a state act as psychological barriers manufacturing the inescapable *national* identity that cuts through other identities like culture, language, color, ethnicity, community, and belief systems. The claim that the walls or borders of a state are built to protect its inmates often sounds untrue as these walls do create violence in the name of the state, and usually expect the individuals to follow a particular type of ideology, belief system—and often punishes or executes them for not doing so. Therefore, life of an individual

within these walls is safe as long as the individual's interests, preferences, thoughts and practices are in sync with the ideas that these walls perpetuate. It may be possible for the people to disrupt, change, or alter the physical nature of the walls or boundaries of a state—and subsequently change their role in a psychological sense also making them subordinate structures to the general-will of the people, but this general-will of the people has never happened in history except for the normative presumption that it is 'aggregated' and 'articulated' through various 'representative' mechanisms that more or less limit themselves to routine policy matters.

The sovereignty that the walls of a state generate and protect is usually a result of the interests of few sections in all societies in any given time. The sovereignty that the walls generate and protect is the result of force by few sections backed by claims for legitimacy that subsequently is made to succeed in gaining the passive legitimacy of the inmates through different restricted indirect representation mechanisms and social-contract theories that defend the necessity of the state. Though the walls of the state have been playing decisive role in defining the sovereignty of the state since the treaty of Westphalia, their significance has been waning recently with the waning sovereignty of the state due to post-state trends like globalization, global capital, transnational ideas, cosmopolitan ambitions of the corporations, internet, anonymous, and the transcending social-constructivist ideas that are defying the walls and borders of the state. Walls are becoming more of mere physical structures trying to protect the waning sovereignty that is in contradiction with the globalization. Brown's work gives us a clinical idea about the future of walls of the state in an emerging post-state environment in the globalizing world.

## REFERENCES

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