

# Gramsci's Concept of the "Simple": Religion, Common Sense, and the Philosophy of Praxis

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*One of the minor yet recurring themes of Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks is his treatment of the "simple," a category he developed to examine the Catholic Church's paternalistic view of common people and peasants as "simple and sincere souls," in contrast to its superior view of cultured intellectuals. Throughout the Notebooks, he examines how the Church's condescending and fatalistic portrayal of the "simple" provides a basis for common sense, reinforcing the conditions of subalternity. Because of the uncritical nature of common sense and the simple's desire for change, he argues for the articulation of a "renewed common sense" containing critical and reflective philosophical foundations that transcend the passivity and paternalism of religion. Such a movement requires defining and disseminating new conceptions of philosophy and culture that are critically grounded and provide a basis of struggle in which the "simple" play the predominant role in the direction of their political lives and in the creation of a new hegemony.*

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In the very first note in the *Prison Notebooks*, written in June 1929 and entitled "On Poverty, Catholicism and the Papacy," Gramsci reflected on the Catholic Church's position on poverty.<sup>1</sup> He recalled a passage from Arthur Roguenant's book *Patrons et ouvriers* in which the author asked a French Catholic worker to reconcile his professed principles of equality with the Gospels' claim that the rich and poor will always exist. In response, the worker said, "We will then leave at least two poor

1. For references to Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, I follow the international standard of citing the notebook number (Q), note number (§), year of publication, and page number. This standard follows the Italian critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere*, edited by Valentino Gerratana (Einaudi, 1975). To date, Columbia University Press has published the first three of five volumes of Joseph A. Buttigieg's critical English translation of the *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1992, 1996, 2007). For English translations that have not yet appeared in Buttigieg's critical edition, I refer to *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (International Publishers, 1971) and *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited by Derek Boothman (University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

persons, so that Jesus Christ will not be proved wrong.” The worker’s sentiment that according to the Gospels some level of inequality will always exist, Gramsci explained, reflected Church doctrine that essentially justified the perpetual existence of poverty. As Gramsci wrote:

This general question should be examined within the whole tradition and doctrine of the Catholic Church. The principal assertions made in the encyclicals of the more recent popes, that is, the most important ones since the question assumed historical significance: 1) private property, especially “landed property,” is a “natural right” which may not be violated, not even through high taxes (the programs of “Christian democratic” tendency for the redistribution—with indemnity—of land to poor peasants, as well as their financial doctrines are derived from these assertions); 2) the poor must accept their lot, since class distinctions and the distribution of wealth are ordained by god and it would be impious to try to eliminate them; 3) alms-giving is a Christian duty and implies the existence of poverty; 4) the social question is primarily moral and religious, not economic, and it must be resolved through Christian charity, the dictates of morality, and the decree of religion. (See *Codice Sociale* and *Sillabo*). (Q151, Gramsci 1992, 100; 1975, 6)<sup>2</sup>

The Church’s position in effect fostered a fatalistic view of poverty in that it considered poverty a part of the order of things, not the result of historical factors created by humans. According to the International Union of Social Studies’ *Codice Sociale* and Pope Pius IX’s *Sillabo*, which Gramsci referenced at the end of the note, the poor should resolve themselves to accept their conditions as natural.<sup>3</sup>

In early 1930, he returned to the theme in a note entitled “Father Bresciani’s Progeny. Catholic Art” (Q1572, Gramsci 1992, 177–9). The note was prompted by the summary of an article entitled “Domande su un’arte cattolica” (Questions on Catholic art), written by Edoardo Fenu. In the article, Fenu (quoted in Gramsci 1992, 178; 1975, 80) criticized Catholic authors for adopting an apologetic tone in their work, and he proceeded to explain that a writer, “just by virtue of being a Catholic, is already endowed with that simple and deep spirit which, transfused into the pages of a story or a poem, will make his art pure, serene, and not in the least pedantic.”<sup>4</sup> In response, Gramsci wrote that Fenu’s article is filled with “many contradictions and inaccuracies; but the conclusion is correct: religion is sterility for art, at least among the religious. In other words, there are no longer any

2. Gramsci eventually included this note in Q20, the “special notebook” titled “Catholic Action—Catholic Integralists—Jesuits—Modernists.”

3. While in prison, Gramsci possessed a book that contained Pius IX’s encyclicals, including the *Il Sillabo*, as well as a copy of the International Union of Social Studies’ *Codice Sociale*. Both aimed to propagate Catholic social teachings, and *Il Sillabo* contained in particular a “syllabus of errors” pertaining to modern thought and liberalism. See Buttigieg’s note in Gramsci (1992, 375–6).

4. Gramsci inserted a bracketed exclamation mark (!) between “his” and “art.”

‘simple and sincere souls’ who are artists.” Given its title, the note connects to the series of notes Gramsci labeled under the rubric “Father Bresciani’s Progeny” to classify literary intellectuals who espoused antidemocratic and reactionary positions similar to those of conservative Jesuit novelist Antonio Bresciani.<sup>5</sup> However, in this note Gramsci also introduced the notion of “the simple” (*i semplici*), which he gradually developed into a category of analysis to examine the Church’s treatment of common people as “simple and sincere souls.”

In Notebook I, §72, Gramsci explains that the Church since the time of the Counter-Reformation had maintained the existence of two unofficial religions: the religion of the “simple,” composed of common people of humble circumstances, and the religion of intellectuals, composed of the “cultured” classes. This distinction, he writes, makes it “simultaneously very easy and very difficult” to be “Catholic.” Common people are expected to believe and to respect the Church without having to strictly follow religious doctrine, such as denouncing pagan superstitions or religious deviations, in effect making the distinction between Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox peasants only ecclesiastical and not religious. In contrast, Catholic intellectuals, he explains, are “expected to embrace a whole slew of notions on encyclicals, counter-encyclicals, papal briefs, apostolic letters, etc., and the historical deviations from the church’s line have been so numerous and so subtle that it is extremely easy to fall into heresy or a semi-heresy or a quarter heresy” (QI§72, Gramsci 1992, 81; 1975, 178).

Though it is not immediately apparent, the analysis Gramsci initiates in Notebook I becomes a minor yet recurring theme in the *Notebooks*, of how the Catholic Church’s patronizing depiction of peasant life romanticizes, legitimizes, and in effect depoliticizes the impoverished conditions and suffering of common people—that is, the “simple.” Following his treatment of the idea over time, the investigation of the “simple” connects to several of the major themes of the *Prison Notebooks*, including intellectuals, common sense, the philosophy of praxis, the critique of historical determinism, and subalternity. His investigation provides a particular example of the general conditions of subalternity and the ways in which sociopolitical subordination is produced and reproduced. The Church’s depiction of the “simple” by itself does not create the conditions of subordination; in fact, the Church’s portrayal confirms the already posited subordination of the masses that exists in society, but as the Church’s representation of the “simple” is disseminated throughout the culture, it becomes an element of common sense and is internalized by the “simple” themselves, who accept their conditions as natural.

Throughout his early miscellaneous notebooks, there are a number of instances in which Gramsci documents how the Church treats intellectuals and common people differently. For instance, in Notebook 3, §76, he highlights the fact that the Church’s use of Latin contributed to the historical “split between the people

5. On Brescianism, see Buttigieg (1992, 43–5) and Musitelli (2009).

and the intellectuals, between the people and culture,” in that Latin functioned as an intellectual language and not as a spoken one. “(Even) religious books are written in Middle-Latin,” he writes, “so that even religious discussion is inaccessible to the people, although religion is the dominant element of culture—the people *watch* the religious *rites* and *hear* the exhortatory sermons, but they cannot follow discussions and ideological developments which are the monopoly of a caste” (Q3§76, Gramsci 1996, 73; 1975, 353–4). In other words, due to linguistic inaccessibility, common people are unable to fully participate in religious life. Yet despite these dualisms, as he explains in Notebook 4, §3, the Church is able “to retain its ties with the people and at the same time to allow a certain aristocratic selection (Platonism and Aristotelianism in the Catholic religion)” among intellectuals (Gramsci 1996, 143; 1975, 424). In Gramsci’s view, the Church’s reinforcement of such class distinctions represents one of its deficiencies in providing a coherent and unitary worldview for the “simple” to understand the circumstances of their life, while also maintaining a paternalistic relationship with them.

Similarly, in Notebook 6, §48, he highlights how a popular Sicilian tale that appeared in Venetian prints utilized religious depictions to reinforce the subordinate position of peasants. In the prints, as he explains, “one sees God imparting the following orders from heaven: to the Pope: ‘pray’; to the Emperor: ‘protect’; to the peasant: ‘and you toil.’” In response to these depictions, Gramsci writes that “the spirit of popular tales conveys the peasant’s conception of himself and of his position in the world, a conception that he has resigned himself to absorbing from religion” (Gramsci 2007, 38; 1975, 722). With such divine commands, peasants are encouraged to accept both religious and political authority while also accepting their life of “toil.” This produces multiple barriers for the “simple” to come to terms with their position. Given the condition of mass poverty and lack of access to political institutions, the masses often turn to superstition, faith, and the Church out of despair and hopelessness. However, Church doctrine and aspects of popular culture reinforce those very conditions. The Church praises the simple’s faithfulness and humble circumstances but discourages their active political participation in the transformation of their conditions.

### The “Simple” in Notebook 8: Religion and Common Sense

Gramsci’s reflections on the “simple” initially emerge in the *Notebooks* as he works through a number of the “main topics” outlined in Notebook 1 that specifically connect to the analysis of religion, such as Catholic Action and, as we have already seen, Father Bresciani’s “progeny.” In March 1932, however, his discussion of the “simple” takes on new meaning as it becomes apparent that his observations also connect to his reflections on philosophy, one of the major research projects of the *Prison Notebooks*. In Notebook 4, Notebook 7, and Notebook 8, Gramsci composed a three-part series entitled “Notes on Philosophy. Materialism and Idealism”

in which he aimed to respond to the materialist and idealist revisions of Marxism, as represented in the work of Nikolai Bukharin and Benedetto Croce.<sup>6</sup> He devoted specific attention to Bukharin's book *The Theory of Historical Materialism: A Popular Manual of Marxist Sociology*, which played a leading role in the international communist movement, as it was directed toward a mass audience and published in multiple languages.<sup>7</sup> One of Gramsci's major concerns was that Bukharin presented Marxism as a form of historical determinism that could be understood according to laws of social evolution, amounting to a form of teleological naturalism. In effect, Bukharin formulated a "materialist" conception of the world that closely resembled the Catholic Church's view. On this point, Gramsci writes that "the author [Bukharin] has no knowledge of the Catholic tradition and is unaware that religion, in fact, vigorously upholds this thesis against idealism; in this case, then, the Catholic religion would be 'materialist'" (Q7§47, Gramsci 2007, 194; 1975, 894). In the third series of "Notes on Philosophy. Materialism and Idealism," which appears in Notebook 8, §166–240, Gramsci composed a string of notes under the rubric "An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy" in which he sought to clarify his position in contrast to Bukharin's while also sketching preliminary details for writing an introduction to philosophy directed toward a mass audience. In the string of notes, he expands the examination of the "simple" by addressing the relationship between religion, philosophy, common sense, and the masses.

In Notebook 8, §204—the first note under the rubric "An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy"—he lays out a list of "preliminary principles" for approaching the topic. Through this exercise, he specifies what he means by "philosophy" and posits the idea that "all men are philosophers":

6. Gramsci initially conceived his investigation of philosophy as a study on the "theory of history and of historiography," which appears as the first entry in the list of "main topics" on the first page of Q1 (Gramsci 1992, 99; 1975, 5). In his letter to Tatiana Schucht of 25 March 1929, he specifies that he intends to focus on Bukharin, Marx, and Croce. Gramsci (1994, 1:257–8) writes:

On the theory of history I would like to have a French book published recently: Bukharin—*Théorie du matérialisme historique* ... and *Oeuvres philosophiques de Marx* published by Alfred Costes—Paris: volume 1: *Contribution à la critique de la Philosophie du droit de Hegel*—volume 2: *Critique de la critique* against Bruno Bauer and company. I already have Benedetto Croce's most important books on this subject.

Over time he developed the project into the "notes on philosophy." On this point, see Frosini (2003, 48–54).

7. Nikolai Bukharin's book was first published in Russian in 1921. Gramsci frequently refers to it as the *Popular Manual*, and Buttigieg (1992, 520) suggests that "in all probability, Gramsci first read the book in the original Russian or in translation—it was widely available in German, French and English—during his stay in the Soviet Union in 1922–23." An authorized English translation of the third Russian edition was published in 1925 under the alternative title *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (International Publishers, 1925).

One must destroy the prejudice that philosophy is a difficult thing just because it is the specific activity of a particular category of learned people, of professional or systematic philosophers. It is, therefore, necessary to show that all men are philosophers, by defining the characteristics of this ["spontaneous"] philosophy that is "everyone's," namely, common sense and religion. Having shown that everyone, in his own way, is a philosopher, that no normal human being of sound mind exists who does not participate, even if unconsciously, in some particular conception of the world, since every "language" is a philosophy—having shown this, one moves on to the second stage, which is that of criticism and consciousness. (Q8§204, Gramsci 2007, 351–2; 1975, 1002; bracketed insertion in the original)

Gramsci is not suggesting here that "all men" are *professional* philosophers but rather that all individuals are philosophers in the sense that we participate in a conception of the world (or a "spontaneously philosophy") that is comprised of and represented in common sense, religion, and language. As he specifies in earlier notes, Gramsci conceives of "common sense" as common beliefs, modes of thought, opinions, and conceptions of the world that are held by the masses. He describes this "common sense" as a fragmentary collection of ideas and opinions drawn from religion, differing philosophies, ideologies, folklore, superstition, and scientific notions that have been absorbed into common usage (cf., Q1§65, Gramsci 1992, 173; 1975, 76). In Notebook 8, §173, which also appears in the third series of "Notes on Philosophy. Materialism and Idealism," he describes common sense as

the "philosophy of non-philosophers"—in other words, the conception of the world *acritically* absorbed from the various social environments in which the moral individuality of the average person is developed. Common sense is not a single conception, identical in time and place. It is the "folklore" of philosophy and, like folklore, it appears in countless forms. The fundamental characteristic of common sense consists in its being a disjointed, incoherent, and inconsequential conception of the world that matches the character of the multitudes whose philosophy it is. Historically, the formation of a homogenous social group is accompanied by the development of a "homogenous"—that is, systematic—philosophy, in opposition to common sense. The main components of common sense are provided by religions—not only by the religion that happens to be dominant at a given time but also by previous religions, popular heretical movements, scientific concepts from the past, etc. "Realistic, materialistic" elements predominate in common sense, but this does not in any way contradict the religious element. (Q8§173, Gramsci 2007, 333–4; 1975, 1045).

Following from this, philosophy represents for Gramsci a "systematic" and "homogenous" conception of the world, whereas common sense represents a "disjointed, incoherent, and inconsequential conception of the world." Religion provides the "main components of common sense," and as he explains at the end of the passage, as well as in other notes, religious materialism predominates common

sense in the form of predestination, providence, spiritualism, and superstition, which are “close to the people” in that people often believe that supernatural or external forces determine the conditions of their lives (Q4§3, Gramsci 1996, 143; 1975, 424; cf., Q4§48, Gramsci 1996, 198; 1975, 474). “Philosophy,” in contrast, “is the critique of religion and of common sense, and it supersedes them. In this respect, philosophy coincides with ‘good sense’” (Q8§204, Gramsci 2007, 352; 1975, 1063).

In Notebook 8, §213, the second note under the rubric “An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy,” Gramsci (2007, 359–60; 1975, 1070–1) distinguishes three inter-related themes connected to the investigation of philosophy, introduced under successive subheadings: “I. The problem of ‘the simple’”; “II. Christian religion”; and “III. Philosophy and common sense or good sense.” His arrangement of these seemingly disparate lines of inquiry reveals how his analysis of the “simple” directly connects to his study of philosophy. In the first section of the note (“The problem of ‘the simple’”), he reflects on the Church’s ability to maintain unity between the “simple” and intellectuals and to prevent the formation of two distinct religions:

The strength of religions, and especially of Catholicism, resides in the fact that they feel very strongly the need for the unity of the whole mass of believers and do their utmost to forestall the detachment of the upper echelons from the lower strata. The Roman church is the most relentless in the struggle to prevent the “official” formation of two religions, one for the intellectuals and another for the “simple.” This has had and continues to have serious drawbacks, but these “drawbacks” are connected with the historical process that totally transforms civic life and not with the rational relationship between the intellectuals and the “simple.” The weakness of immanentist philosophies in general consists precisely in the fact that they have been unable to create an ideological unity between the bottom and the top, between the intellectuals and the mass (cf. the theme “Renaissance and Reformation”). (Q8§213i, Gramsci 2007, 359; 1975, 1070)

This section of the note exemplifies Gramsci’s critical analysis of the Church. He admires the Church’s ability to maintain religious unity in light of the detached relationship between intellectuals and the “simple.” As he documents in his earlier notes, the Church’s distinct treatment of the “simple” and of intellectuals reinforces class differences, yet the Church is able to maintain a strong relationship with the “simple” so as to avoid the formation of two “official” religions. For the Church, according to Gramsci, the “drawback” hindering religious unity is not the relationship between intellectuals and the “simple” but the secularization of civil society as a “historical process” that is transforming life.

At the philosophical level, Gramsci questions the limits of the Church’s ability to maintain unity. Similar to “immanentist philosophies” (in the transcendental sense), the Church is unable to create ideological unity between the masses and intellectuals, instead providing distinct philosophies restricted to specific social groups. His

parenthetical reference to “the theme ‘Renaissance and Reformation’” at the end of the passage alludes to his similar assessment of the Renaissance as a cultural movement that remained aristocratic and not popular—unlike the Reformation—in that the Renaissance’s influence did not extend beyond elite circles.<sup>8</sup> As he writes in Notebook 8, §156: “In order for religion to have at least the appearance of being absolute and objectively universal, it would have been necessary for it to manifest itself as monolithic or, at the very least, as intellectually uniform among all believers—which is very far from reality (different doctrines, sects, tendencies, as well class differences: the simple and the cultured, etc.)” (Gramsci 2007, 323; 1975, 1035). The Church, he later writes in Notebook II, §13, retains a “‘surface’ unity” to avoid splintering into different groups but “is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions: there is one Catholicism for the peasants, one for the *petits-bourgeois* and town workers, one for women, and one for intellectuals which is itself variegated and disconnected” (Gramsci 1971, 420; 1975, 1397). In this sense, the articulation of philosophy is not simply a theoretical question but a question of how philosophy translates into practice. As he writes in Notebook 8, §213i:

The question is this: should a movement be deemed philosophical just because it devotes itself to developing a specialized culture for a restricted group of intellectuals? Or is a movement philosophical only when, in the course of elaborating a superior and scientifically coherent form of thought, it never fails to remain in contact with the “simple,” and even finds in such contacts the source of the issues that need to be studied and resolved? Only through this contact does a philosophy become “historical,” cleanse itself of elements that are “individual” in origin, and turn itself into “life.” (Gramsci 2007, 360; 1975, 1071)

Gramsci’s idea of philosophy becoming “historical” and “turn[ing] itself into ‘life’” echoes Marx’s notion of “thinking in practice,” from his second thesis on Feuerbach, in that the significance of philosophy as a movement pertains to its level of social diffusion and not simply to its adoption by intellectuals.<sup>9</sup> The implication of this observation with respect to Catholicism is that the Church maintains a level

8. Cf. Q4§3 (Gramsci 1996, 141–2; 1975, 423); Q7§1 (Gramsci 2007, 153–5; 1975, 851–2); Q7§44 (Gramsci 2007, 193–4; 1975, 892–3).

9. In the second thesis, Marx (1976, 4) writes:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.

On the importance of Marx’s second thesis on Feuerbach in Gramsci’s thought, see Thomas (2009, 307–83).



of contact with the “simple” but does not seek to resolve the contradictions of their existence. In fact, the Church reinforces their conditions. This relationship, as we shall see below, acts as a foil for Gramsci to envision the philosophy of praxis as a philosophy capable of transforming itself into “life” while yet needing to remain in contact with the “simple.”

In the second part of Notebook 8, §213, Gramsci comments on an article entitled “Individualismo pagano e individualismo cristiano” (Pagan individualism and Christian individualism), published in the journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*. The article highlights how the Church’s conception of life, which included elements of divine providence and immortality, underpinned the notion of Christian individualism. According to the article, “Faith in a secure future, in the immortality of the soul destined to beatitude, in the certainty of attaining eternal happiness, motivated the intense effort to achieve inner perfection and spiritual nobility.”<sup>10</sup> Such a notion, as the article suggests, provided individuals with the security of knowing that their “struggle against evil” was supported by a “superior force.” In response, Gramsci observes that such a conception provided the popular masses with a way of understanding and acting in the world. “In other words,” he writes, “in a certain historical period and in certain specific historical conditions, Christianity was ‘necessary’ for progress; it was the specific form of the ‘rationality of the world and of life,’ and it provided the general framework for human practical activity” (Q8§213ii, Gramsci 2007, 360; 1975, 1071). Following the notion of translating philosophy into practice, Gramsci thus recognizes how Christianity functioned in specific cultural and historical conditions for making sense of life, yet he also recognizes the limits of such forms of religious materialism.

In the note’s third part, Gramsci returns to the notion of common sense, distinguishing it from philosophy:

Perhaps it is useful to make a “practical” distinction between philosophy and common sense in order to be better able to show what one is trying to arrive at. Philosophy means, rather specifically, a conception of the world with salient individual traits. Common sense is the conception of the world that is most widespread among the popular masses in a historical period. One wants to change common sense and create a “new common sense”—hence the need to take the “simple” into account. (Q8§213iii, Gramsci 2007, 360; 1975, 1071).

In addition to making a “practical” distinction between philosophy, as a coherent concept of the world, and common sense, as the popular mentality of the masses, Gramsci alludes to the radical implication of his investigation, which is the political and pedagogical project of changing common sense and creating a “new common

10. Quoted in Gramsci (2007, 360; 1975, 1071): “Individualismo pagano e individualismo cristiano.” The passage is also quoted in Q11§12 (Gramsci 1975, 1389), from where it is translated in Gramsci (1971, 337).

sense.” The process requires taking the “simple” into account in order to ascertain the “issues that need to be studied and resolved,” as he mentioned in the first section of the note. As we shall see below, this requirement figures into his notion of the philosophy of praxis and into the relationship between intellectuals and the masses.

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci used the phrase “philosophy of praxis” partially out of the need to camouflage his references to Marxism, but more significantly it represents his own theoretical separation from Hegelian and Crocean notions of “philosophy of spirit,” on the one hand, and the historical economism of mechanistic forms of Marxism, on the other.<sup>11</sup> In conceiving Marxism as a philosophy of praxis, Gramsci placed himself in a tradition of nondeterminist Marxist thought—as represented by the work of Antonio Labriola—that opposed idealist, positivist, naturalist, and universalist conceptions of history.<sup>12</sup> In the chronology of the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci used the phrase initially in Notebook 5 to describe the foundations of Machiavelli’s conception of the world as a “‘philosophy of praxis’ or ‘neo-humanism,’ in that it does not recognize transcendental or immanent (in the metaphysical sense) elements but is based entirely on the concrete action of man, who out of historical necessity works and transforms reality” (Q5§127, Gramsci 1996, 378; 1975, 657). He also uses the phrase numerous times in Notebook 8, as we shall see below in his notes on religion, without fully articulating its meaning. However, in Notebook 11 he provides a definitive description of the notion, in a critique of Bukharin’s conception of historical materialism: “It has been forgotten that in the case of a very common expression [historical materialism] one should put the accent on the first term—‘historical’—and not on the second, which is of metaphysical origin. The philosophy of praxis is absolute ‘historicism,’ the absolute secularisation and earthliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history. It is along this line that one must trace the thread of the new conception of the world” (Q11§27, Gramsci 1971, 465; 1975, 1437; bracketed insertion added by Hoare and Smith). Though the object of Gramsci’s critique is Bukharin in this passage, the thrust of his criticism also applies to religion and the formation of common sense.

In Notebook 8, §220, which is the third note under the rubric “An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy,” Gramsci delineates the idea of the philosophy of praxis by distinguishing it in relation to “common sense” and the “simple.” In this process, he further specifies what he means by the idea of wanting to “change common sense:”

A philosophy of praxis must initially adopt a polemical stance, as superseding the existing mode of thinking. It must, therefore, present itself as a critique of “common sense” (but only after it has based itself on common sense in order

11. For discussions on these points, see Dainotto (2009), Green (2011), and Haug (2001).

12. See Q3§31 (Gramsci 1996, 30–1; 1975, 309–10), Q4§3 (Gramsci 1996, 140–1; 1975, 421–2), and Q8§198 (Gramsci 2007, 348; 1975, 1060). Cf., Dainotto (2009).

to show that “everyone” is a philosopher, and that the point is not to introduce a totally new form of knowledge into “everyone’s” individual life, but to revitalize an already existing activity and make it “critical”. (Q8§220, Gramsci 2007, 369; 1975, 1080)

For Gramsci, the idea is not for the philosophy of praxis to replace common sense but to demonstrate that “everyone” is a philosopher and to criticize the existing elements of common sense in order to make it critical.

He proceeds in the same note to explain that the philosophy of praxis “must also present itself as a critique of the philosophy of the intellectuals, out of which the history of philosophy arises.” The history of philosophy, in his view, “can be considered as the history of the ‘high points’ of the progress of ‘common sense’—or, at least, of the common sense of the most culturally refined strata of the society.” The point of such a critique is to “provide a synthesis of the ‘problems’ that arose in the course of the history of philosophy, in order to criticize them, demonstrate their real value (if they still have any) or their importance as links in a chain, and define the new problems of the present time” (Q8§220, Gramsci 2007, 369; 1975, 1080). In other words, he suggests that the critique of common sense includes the criticism of the history of philosophy itself, with the objective of ascertaining the relevance of particular modes of thought, their historical significance, and their relation to contemporary problems. As a critique of both common sense and the “high points” of philosophy that shape it, the philosophy of praxis aims to strengthen the critical elements of common sense in order to make it coherent.

In contrast, the Church, in Gramsci’s view, attempts to preserve the status and worldview of the “simple” so as to avoid elevating them to a higher level of consciousness. The Church, he observes, is aware of the philosophical distinction between the religion of intellectuals and that of the “simple,” but it wants to avoid the separation from becoming a political and organizational split:

The fact that the Church finds itself facing a problem of the “simple” means that there has been a rupture within the community of the faithful, a rupture that cannot be healed by raising the simple to the level of the intellectuals (and the Church no longer plans to undertake such a task which is “economically” beyond its current means). The Church, instead, exercises an iron discipline to prevent the intellectuals from going beyond certain limits of “differentiation,” lest they make the rupture catastrophic and irreparable. (Q8§220, Gramsci 2007, 369; 1975, 1080)

Historically, Gramsci observes, previous “ruptures” among the community of the faithful prompted the formation of new religious orders, such as the Dominican and Franciscan orders and the Society of Jesus, so as to “discipline’ the masses of the ‘simple’” and preserve the prevailing relations (Q8§220, Gramsci 2007, 370; 1975, 1080–1). Although the Church maintained unity—by preventing the formation

of two official religions—the Catholicism of the intellectuals remained restricted to a narrow segment of the population, as the intellectuals did not align themselves with the masses so as to address their interests and raise them to a higher level of cultural understanding. As Gramsci writes later, “The Church does not even envisage such a task” (Q11§12, Gramsci 1971, 331; 1975, 1383). Thus, by not aligning itself with the masses, the Church reinforced the common sense of the “simple,” who drew upon it to understand and ameliorate their conditions.

Prior to the notes devoted to “An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy” in Notebook 8, Gramsci’s discussions of the “simple,” of common sense, and of philosophy appear as distinct lines of inquiry in the *Prison Notebooks*. The three notes create a nexus that reveals how the separate investigations intersect and illuminate one another. These notes reveal how his previous notes documenting the Church’s paternalistic view of the “simple” in effect pertain to the formation of popular knowledge, common sense, and the ways in which the masses conceive themselves and the world. It is along these lines that the Catholic Church can be understood as a “collective intellectual,” as Tommaso La Rocca (1991, 87; 2009) has argued. As an organization, it established and maintained historical relationships with the “simple” while also promoting patronizing depictions of peasant life and praising common people’s humble and poor circumstances. Such depictions, as Gramsci documents, are manifest in encyclicals, papal briefs, literature, art, and folktales. Such representations reinforce the conditions of the “simple” and provide a basis for political and intellectual passivity, as the poor view their social position as natural or as a result of God’s will. Gramsci’s concern is that such views are absorbed into common sense and become an active part of culture, which in turn reinforces the status quo. In addition to echoing Marx’s notion of “thinking in practice,” this aspect of Gramsci’s analysis, as Derek Boothman (1995, xx) has pointed out, also draws from Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right”* in that Gramsci conceives religious ideology as a “material force” when it is gripped by the masses.<sup>13</sup> In other words, Gramsci is interested in how religious ideology becomes an element of common sense and in turn affects modes of thought, political participation, and the organization of society. It is in this sense that religion is absorbed by common sense and “turn[s] itself into ‘life’” (Q8§213i, Gramsci 2007, 360; 1975, 1071).

### The “Simple” in Notebook 11: The Philosophy of Praxis and “Renewed Common Sense”

Soon after completing Notebook 8, Gramsci devoted two thematically organized “special” notebooks to the topic of philosophy: Notebook 10 (“The Philosophy of

13. In a “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right,” Marx (1975 [1844], 182) writes: “The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.”

Benedetto Croce”) and Notebook 11 (“Notes for an Introduction and Starting Point for the Study of Philosophy and the History of Culture”).<sup>14</sup> He organized and re-drafted the three-part series of “Notes on Philosophy. Materialism and Idealism” from Notebook 4, Notebook 7, and Notebook 8, devoting Notebook 10 largely to the critique of idealism and Notebook 11 to materialism. In the first entry of Notebook 11—which he entitled “Some Preliminary Points of Reference” and which appears as Notebook 11, §12, in the Gerratana edition<sup>15</sup>—he synthesized his earlier ideas on philosophy, the “simple,” and common sense. In effect, he combined, rewrote, and expanded six notes from Notebook 8, including the three notes on “An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy” discussed above, and one note from Notebook 10. In his explication of these themes, he approached the study of philosophy from the perspective of presenting it to a mass audience while also posing the philosophy of praxis as an independent and self-sufficient philosophy.

Gramsci opens Notebook 11, §12, by reaffirming that it must be shown that “all men are ‘philosophers.’” He explains that everyone is a philosopher because each one’s intellectual activity is a manifestation of a conception of the world that is posited in language, common sense, good sense, and popular religion, which includes “the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, ways of seeing things and of acting” (Q11§12, Gramsci 1971, 323; 1975, 1375). In other words, all humans engage in philosophical and intellectual activity at various levels of life activity. The content of that philosophy—for instance, the Church’s portrayal of the “simple”—is what Gramsci wants to examine and question. After demonstrating that “everyone is a philosopher,” he explains, “one moves on to the second level, which is of awareness and criticism”:

That is to say, one proceeds to the question—is it better to “think,” without having a critical awareness, in a disjointed and episodic way? In other words, is it better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world (and this can be one’s village or province; it can have its origins in the parish and the “intellectual activity” of the local priest or ageing patriarch whose wisdom is law, or in the little old woman

14. Gramsci entered the title of Q11 (“Notes for an Introduction and Starting Point for the Study of Philosophy and the History of Culture”) on page 11 of his notebook, which was untypical of his usual practice of entering a title on the first page of his “special” notebooks. However, in Q10II§60 he refers to Q11 as “the notebook on the ‘Introduction to the Study of Philosophy’” (Gramsci 1995, 319; 1975, 1357). On these points, see Francioni and Frosini (2009a, 3).

15. Although “Some Preliminary Points of Reference” appears as the twelfth entry in Q11, evidence suggests that it is likely the first note Gramsci entered in the notebook. As Gianni Francioni has documented, Gramsci reserved the first ten pages of some of his “special” notebooks for later-planned introductions, meaning that the first notes he entered appear on page 11. Along with Q11, Q19–22 and Q25 follow this pattern. See Francioni (2009, 31) and Francioni and Frosini (2009a, 3).

who has inherited the lore of the witches or the minor intellectual soured by his own stupidity and inability to act)? Or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one's own brain, choose one's sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world, be one's own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality? (QII§12, Gramsci 1971, 323–34; 1975, 1375–6).

As these rhetorical questions suggest, the idea of living according to one's own intellect and will presents an opening to question common sense and to formulate a systematic conception of the world. The point is to become critically self-aware of one's conception of the world, to think independently, and to be cognizant of the mental and practical activities one adopts as one's own. Whether one is aware of it or not, one's conception of the world is mediated through the social environment of which one is a part and by "the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved" from the moment of consciously engaging with the world. One's intellectual orientation, as Gramsci illustrates, can range from that of the local priest or the lore of witches to that of an intellectual. In other words, one's socialization and formation of consciousness is subject to one's social position, cultural environment, and interaction with others.

However, Gramsci argues that it is preferable to develop one's consciousness critically with respect to externally imposed elements, and this requires consciously developing one's conception of the world as opposed to uncritically or passively accepting elements of thought that may contradict one's own activity. Such an undertaking includes understanding one's self in relation to the historical processes of which one is a part: "The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without the benefit of leaving an inventory. At the outset, it is necessary for one to compile such an inventory" (QII§12, Gramsci 1971, 324; 1975, 1376; translation slightly modified). As this suggests, our consciousness is always situated within historical processes, and those processes deposit "an infinity of traces" in our consciousness without "leaving an inventory." To know one's self critically requires compiling such an inventory, to be self-conscious of the composition of one's consciousness. This process itself involves understanding one's material situation and social position historically and within the ensemble of one's social relations.

Gramsci's reference to the idea of "knowing thyself" in Notebook II echoes a similar idea he developed sixteen years earlier in an article entitled "Socialism and Culture," which appeared in the newspaper *Il Grido del Popolo* in 1916. In that context, Gramsci's concern was similar to his focus of Notebook II: namely, providing a critique and alternative to determinist conceptions of history and culture. Expounding on the idea of critical self-awareness, he paraphrased

passages from Vico's *New Science*, in which Vico provided a political interpretation of Solon's dictum to "know thyself," which Socrates later adopted as his own:

Vico maintains that in this dictum Solon wished to admonish the plebeians, who believed themselves to be of *bestial origin* and the nobility to be of *divine origin*, to reflect on themselves and see that they had the *same human nature as the nobles* and hence should claim to be *their equals in civil law*. Vico then points to this consciousness of human equality between plebeians and nobles as the basis and historical reason for the rise of the democratic republics of antiquity. (Gramsci 1977 [1916], 10)

Gramsci draws into focus the point that Solon prompted the plebeians to question their own conception of themselves as bestial in origin. Such an overturning of their internalized notions of themselves was necessary for their struggle for equality to advance. In this sense, the notion of "knowing thyself" has radical political implications. The point is not simply to know one's individual self but to understand one's historical self, as in one's social position within the larger historical trajectory—that is, to understand oneself in relation to the philosophical foundations of one's political context and to question the dominant discourses that structure the formation of one's existence, especially those discourses that reinforce the subordination of one social group to another. With respect to the "simple," their position is comparable to the plebeians of ancient Athens in that they have internalized a religious conception of themselves that has justified their subordinate social position. Yet, in reality, their conditions were not the creation of God but of humans.

The process of "knowing thyself" in the formation of a historical consciousness requires a critical analysis of the context and origins of one's beliefs, to be aware of the elements of one's thought, even the elements that have become uncritically absorbed from popular philosophy, religion, and common sense. However, this is a difficult process due to the contradictory nature of the ensemble of social relations and the varying elements of historical consciousness among different social groups. "Among subaltern groups," Gramsci writes in Notebook 8, "given the lack of historical initiative, the fragmentation is greater; they face a harder struggle to liberate themselves from imposed (rather than freely propounded) principles in order to arrive at an autonomous historical consciousness" (Q8§153, Gramsci 2007, 321; 1975, 1033). The idea of arriving at "an autonomous historical consciousness" suggests that the point is not for intellectuals to impose a new philosophy or set of beliefs on the "simple" but to address the concerns of the "simple" from where they are at—from their common sense—so as to confront the practical necessity of giving conscious direction to their activity. There are a number of historical examples, as Gramsci points out, such as the rise of popular universities and other movements in Italy, that demonstrate the simple's "genuine enthusiasm and a strong determination to attain a higher cultural level and a higher conception of the world" (Q11§12, Gramsci 1971, 330; 1975, 1382).

Attaining a higher level of culture presents a moment of transformation in which one questions the coherence of one's conception of the world in order to provide "conscious direction to one's activity." Gramsci describes this process as the formation of "good sense," defined as "the healthy nucleus that exists in 'common sense' ... which deserves to be made more unitary and coherent," and also as a "renewed common sense" that possesses coherence (Q11§12, Gramsci 1971, 328; 1975, 1380). In his words:

A philosophy of praxis cannot but present itself at the outset in a polemical and critical guise, as superseding the existing mode of thinking and existing concrete thought (the existing cultural world). First of all, therefore, it must be a criticism of "common sense," basing itself initially, however, on common sense in order to demonstrate that "everyone" is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making "critical" an already existing activity. (Q11§12, Gramsci 1971, 330–1; 1975, 1383)

"But," he argues, "this can only happen if the demands of cultural contact with the 'simple' are continually felt" (Q11§12, Gramsci 1971, 330; 1975, 1382–3). Unlike the relationship with the Church, this requires "a dialectic between the intellectuals and the masses" in which "the intellectual stratum is tied to an analogous movement on the part of the mass of the 'simple,' who raise themselves to higher levels of culture and at the same time extend their circle of influence towards the stratum of specialised intellectuals" (Q11§12, Gramsci 1971, 334; 1975, 1386).

This makes the philosophy of praxis distinct from Catholicism:

The position of the philosophy of praxis is the antithesis of the Catholic. The philosophy of praxis does not tend to leave the "simple" in their primitive philosophy of common sense, but rather to lead them to a higher conception of life. If it affirms the need for contact between intellectuals and simple it is not in order to restrict scientific activity and preserve unity at the low level of the masses, but precisely in order to construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups. (Q11§12, Gramsci 1971, 332–3; 1975, 1384–5)

In this sense, unlike the Catholic Church, the task of the philosophy of praxis is to remain in contact with the "simple" so as to develop a higher level of culture. As Gramsci noted earlier, the Church could not conceive of raising the "simple" to the level of the intellectuals so as to heal the rupture among the faithful. A "dialectic between the intellectuals and the masses" presents the conditions for the diffusion of a higher conception of the world to expand beyond the confines of narrow intellectual groups and to transform the greater culture.

The process of defining a critical conception of the world and formulating a decisive will includes confronting traditional ways of thinking. It is on this point that



Gramsci's criticisms of religion and mechanistic notions of Marxism intersect. The Church presents a deterministic conception of the world in which the "simple" are portrayed as an object, without freedom or agency, whose conditions have been created by God. Determinist conceptions of Marxism, such as the one Bukharin presents in the *Popular Manual*, amount to a similar form of fatalism, in Gramsci's view, in that social conditions are conceived as constructions of objective historical laws. "It should be noted," he writes, "how the deterministic, fatalistic and mechanistic element has been a direct ideological 'aroma' emanating from the philosophy of praxis, rather like religion or drugs (in their stupefying effect)." Such a conception, he argues, was "made necessary and justified historically by the 'subaltern' character of certain social strata," providing a general framework to understand life and the world (QII§12, Gramsci 1971, 336; 1975, 1387–8). Both views amount to mechanistic conceptions of history in that the conditions of the "simple" are posited as the consequence of extrahuman causes. It was along these lines, Gramsci suggests, that Bukharin reproduced a Catholic conception of the world, albeit without having knowledge of its tradition.<sup>16</sup>

The "mechanicist conception" of the world, Gramsci writes, "has been a religion of the subaltern [which] is shown by an analysis of the development of the Christian religion" (QII§12, Gramsci 1971, 337; 1975, 1389). Such a conception, he continues, provides the popular masses not only with "a specific way of rationalising the world" and a "general framework for real practical activity" but also with justifications for historical defeats and faith in an indeterminate future:

When you don't have the initiative in the struggle and the struggle itself comes eventually to be identified with a series of defeats, mechanical determinism becomes a tremendous force of moral resistance, of cohesion and of patient and obstinate perseverance. "I have been defeated for the moment, but the tide of history is working for me in the long term." Real will takes on the garments of an act of faith in a certain rationality of history and in a primitive and empirical form of impassioned finalism which appears in the role of a substitute for the Predestination or Providence of confessional religions. (QII§12, Gramsci 1971, 336; 1975, 1388)

In this instance, historical determinism functions similar to religion, but religion in a new guise. Religious providence is replaced with historical providence, religious salvation with historical salvation. In both instances, the conditions of the "simple" are understood as being determined by an external force and their resolution as occurring in the next world or in an unknown future. In this sense, Gramsci's criticism of religious materialism functions along the same lines as his criticism of vulgar forms of historical materialism.

16. See Q7§47 (Gramsci 2007, 194–5; 1975, 894), Q8§215 (Gramsci 2007, 364–5; 1975, 1075–6); QII§17 (Gramsci 1971, 440–6; 1975, 1411–16).

A critical turning point, as discussed above, emerges when subaltern groups confront their mechanistic conception of the world through the practical necessity of giving conscious direction to their will and activity:

But when the “subaltern” becomes directive and responsible for the economic activity of the masses, mechanicism at a certain point becomes an imminent danger and a revision must take place in modes of thinking because a change has taken place in the social mode of existence. The boundaries and the dominion of the “force of circumstance” have become restricted. But why? Because, basically, if yesterday the subaltern element was a thing, today it is no longer a thing but an historical person, a protagonist; if yesterday it was not responsible, because “resisting” a will external to itself, now it feels itself to be responsible because it is no longer resisting but an agent, necessarily active and taking the initiative. (QII§12, Gramsci 1971, 336–7; 1975, 1388)

Here Gramsci describes how one’s mode of thinking is transformed from a determinist to an absolute historicist conception of the world. It is in this moment that the “subaltern element”—which Gramsci uncharacteristically uses in the singular in this passage—no longer sees itself as a “thing,” as a determined artifact produced by the immutable laws of history or God, but as a “historical person, a protagonist,” transformed by a critical understanding of one’s situation through the process of self-liberation. In effect, liberation begins with critical thinking and the formulation of critical consciousness (Buttigieg 2011).

After “Some Preliminary Points of Reference” in Notebook II, Gramsci devotes a section of the notebook to an analysis of Bukharin’s *Popular Manual* under the title “Critical Observations and Notes on an Attempt at a *Popular Manual of Sociology*.”<sup>17</sup> In the first note of the section, he returns to the question of how one should approach writing a book on philosophy directed toward a mass audience, and he argues that “a work like the *Popular Manual*, which is essentially destined for a community of readers who are not professional intellectuals, should have taken as its starting point a critical analysis of the philosophy of common sense” (QII§13, Gramsci 1971, 419; 1975, 1396). Because the religious and materialistic elements that predominate common sense are based upon “‘superstitious’ and acritical” foundations, one of the dangers of Bukharin’s *Popular Manual* is that it “often reinforces, instead of scientifically criticising, these acritical elements which have caused common sense to remain Ptolemaic, anthropomorphic and anthropocentric” (QII§13, Gramsci 1971, 420; 1975, 1397). The critical analysis of common sense, following Gramsci’s approach, entails addressing it in a way similar to the analysis of philosophy or of a conception of the world, but with the intent of ascertaining what the masses think. The point of such an approach is to go beyond common

17. See QII§13–35, Gramsci (1975, 1396–1450). Also see Gramsci (1971, 419–72), although appearing in a different order.

sense and to present an opening for the articulation of a new philosophy and “to create a ‘new’ good sense” (QII§13, Gramsci 1971, 423; 1975, 1400).

## Conclusion

Gramsci’s observations on the “simple” and the Catholic Church’s paternalistic portrayal of common people that initially appear in Notebook I present an entry point into several intersecting lines of inquiry in which he examines how religious, philosophical, and cultural currents become elements of common sense and affect modes of thinking, political participation, and the organization of society. He was motivated by the idea of examining the relationship between intellectuals and the people in the formation of common ways of thinking and modes of life.<sup>18</sup> Given the Catholic Church’s influential position in the formation of the Italian state and culture, it functioned as a collective intellectual. It actively disseminated a philosophy and worldview that reinforced the impoverished conditions of common people with religious and divine explanations that in effect depoliticized class inequality and circumvented its resolution. As the “simple” had internalized a conception of the world that justified their own subalternity, Gramsci believed it was necessary to develop a mode of thinking that addressed the complexities of modern society.

Because of the uncritical nature of common sense, Gramsci argues that it is necessary for the “simple” to develop a “new common sense, “ or a “renewed common sense,” that contains critical and reflective philosophical foundations that transcend the passivity and paternalism of religion and dominant ideologies. In his view, deterministic and positivist forms of Marxism provide inadequate responses to religion because they are founded upon a similarly fatalistic worldview. The philosophy of praxis, as complete and autonomous, provides, he contends, the basis for a new common sense based upon critical consciousness. The philosophy of praxis, in his view, presents a superior conception of the world when compared to common sense and other ideologies, including religion, because it is founded upon an “absolute secularisation and earthliness of thought” and upon a practical understanding of human existence that aims to empower subaltern groups in their struggle for intellectual and political hegemony (QII§27, Gramsci 1971, 465; 1975, 1437).<sup>19</sup> He writes in Notebook 10: “For the philosophy of praxis, ideologies are anything but arbitrary; they are real historical facts which must be combated and their nature as instruments of domination revealed, not for reasons of morality and so on, but precisely for reasons of political struggle so as to make the governed intellectually independent of the

18. On this point, see Gramsci to Tatiana Schucht, 19 March 1927 (Gramsci 1994, 1:84); and Gramsci to Tatiana Schucht, 3 August 1931 (Gramsci 1994, 2:52).

19. On this point, see Green and Ives (2009) and Wainwright (2010).

governors, in order to destroy one hegemony and create another as a necessary moment in the overturning of praxis” (Q10II§41xii, Gramsci 1995, 395; 1975, 1319). The development of a “new common sense” is therefore necessary for the “simple” to become “intellectually independent” in the struggle to transform their social conditions and lives.

Gramsci’s critique of common sense illustrates the radically democratic and critical focus of his analysis of the “simple” in that he identifies the limitations of their conception of the world and modes of thought in order to improve and strengthen their intellectual capacities and in turn the effectiveness of their political activity. In viewing the philosophy of praxis as the basis for a renewed common sense, he sought to demonstrate that the conditions of the “simple” are neither divine nor natural and that prayer, predestination, and what he calls “superstition” will not transform their circumstances. Producing a higher conception of culture requires a philosophical movement that does not remain restricted among intellectuals, that “never forgets to remain in contact with the ‘simple’ and indeed finds in this contact the source of the problems it sets out to study and to resolve” (Q11§12, Gramsci 1971, 330; 1975, 1382). Such a movement requires articulating and disseminating a new conception of philosophy and culture as critically grounded while providing a basis of struggle. This essentially constitutes the foundation for a radical form of democracy in which the “simple” play the predominant role in the direction of their political lives and in the creation of a new hegemony.

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