

Gender Egalitarianism, Fertility, and an Attribution Error: a rejoinder on “The Gender Egalitarian Family Model: Empirical and Theoretical Problems”^{1,2}

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Abstract: This is a rejoinder to a paper published in this journal authored by *Paul* (2026). The paper to which this rejoinder refers takes aim at the gender egalitarian family model, and in places it makes points the field needs to absorb: the recent cross-national correlation between fertility and female labour force participation has lost some of its force; Nordic period and cohort fertility have declined in ways the framework may not have predicted; and the gendered attitudinal divergence between young men and young women is real. Yet the paper moves too readily from a critique of particular explanatory and predictive claims to a much broader rejection of the gender-egalitarian family model as a policy orientation. In doing so, it underplays an important normative and institutional strand of the literature, which has been concerned not only with demographic outcomes but also with equity and fairness as the conditions under which people can “write their own biographies.” The paper’s closing balancing act between liberal values and “the simultaneous interests of both the state and society in its own reproduction” as it is written makes me feel quite uneasy (*Paul* 2026: 420).

Keywords: Fertility · Gender equity · Nordic · Demographic determinism

¹ This is a rejoinder on the following contribution: *Paul, Darel E.* 2026: The Gender Egalitarian Family Model: Empirical and Theoretical Problems. In: *Comparative Population Studies* 51: 403-426. <https://doi.org/10.12765/CPoS-2026-17>

² Author’s note: On a technical point: I was given an article to review which did not contain the author’s name. This was only added in as references by the editors at the publication stage. This is important for the following reason. Rejoinders can easily be misunderstood – one reason is the fact that you need to take what is written in the paper as only point of reference. You cannot crosscheck against the wider corpus of the author’s work and, in turn calibrate the own response.

So, to the author(s) of the original paper: I would much rather have sat down, had a cup of tea with you, and talked about your paper and what I like about it and what I was uneasy about. However, in this case, the process didn’t allow that to happen. I have therefore tried to respond carefully to what is written on the page and to represent its meaning faithfully. If I have misunderstood any part of the argument, I apologise. I also truly hope that you do not take my article as a personal or professional criticism, but rather as a dialectic tool to help us advance our shared understanding of this most important topic.

1 Introduction

The paper to which this rejoinder responds (hereafter “the paper”) makes a sustained case that the gender egalitarian family model, closely associated with the work of *Esping-Andersen* (e.g. 2009), *Goldscheider* (e.g. 2015) and others and grounded in the idea that gender equality at work and at home jointly underpins “successful family (re)production” in highly developed countries, has been substantially overstated in the demographic literature.

Empirically, the paper argues that the cross-national positive correlation between fertility and female labour force participation, on which much of the case for the model has rested since the 1990s, is more of a statistical artefact rather than a real reversal of an older relationship; that Nordic period and cohort fertility have declined sharply since around 2010 in ways the framework did not anticipate; and that union formation has been weakening alongside fertility in the same set of countries. Theoretically, the paper argues that gender revolution theory rests on three foundational assumptions: that humans are biologically and psychologically driven to seek coupling and reproduction; that women in particular wish to bear children at near-replacement levels; and that men will eventually embrace gender egalitarianism as the price of family formation, each of which it finds increasingly implausible in light of rising childlessness, divergent gendered political attitudes among the young, and male backlash. The paper closes by calling for a reckoning with the gender egalitarian family model as a “solution to the problems of low fertility and family breakdown”, and by suggesting that liberal values of gender egalitarianism, moral autonomy and individual freedom will have to be balanced against “the simultaneous interests of both the state and society in its own reproduction” (both quotes: *Paul* 2026: 420).

In what follows I take issue with the paper at several levels, while granting that some of its empirical work is genuinely useful. My central claim is that the paper assembles selected predictive claims from a diverse literature into a unified position that I think few, if any, scholars would recognise as their own in full. The paper recognises several components of the wider Nordic institutional bundle, but analytically subsumes them under the gender-egalitarian family model and judges that model primarily by demographic outcomes. The “prescription” it refutes is, therefore, only a very stylised representation of the wider Nordic institutional bundle, including welfare states, labour protection, social and educational infrastructure, and gender relations, to which demographers have long pointed. The “theory” it refutes is built on three assumptions which bear little resemblance to how most of us working in this area actually conceive of the underlying argument, which is fundamentally about equity, fairness, and the conditions under which people can construct the lives they hope for. From that starting point I argue that low fertility is best understood as a symptom of broken institutions, gender among them but far from only, and that equity, beyond gender alone, is the more honest framing both for the contemporary moment and for any sensible response to it. I close by reading the paper’s final paragraph as a slip into territory that demography would do well not to enter.

I do not propose to go through the paper line by line, nor to attempt a fresh review of the very large macro- and micro-level literature on gender and fertility. So much has been written that I doubt I can add anything useful at that level. I would note in passing that this includes important literatures that the paper does not cite, and a few works that it cites in ways their authors would probably not recognise. What I want to do instead is reflect on how the issue looks from where I sit, because I think the paper, despite its real contributions, rests on a framing that is not one I fully recognise.

2 "Just become like Sweden"

Looking at the first lines of the abstract and the paper itself, the basic assumption is that gender egalitarianism has been held up as the dominant explanation for "successful family (re)production" (Paul 2026: 403), which I am going to assume means higher total fertility rates (TFRs). Therefore, if a state wants higher TFRs, it should "deploy" further gender egalitarianism.

A few years ago, when people asked what should be done about low fertility, many of us would indeed say something like: "become more like Norway or Sweden" – highly developed countries that managed to sustain generally higher period TFRs around 1.8-1.9 and broadly stable cohort fertility. This must have felt like the "prescription" the abstract refers to, and the paper is largely an attempt to call time on it.

Now, many of us who espoused these positions might look like we have egg on our faces as period TFRs in the "promised lands" of Northern Europe drop to hitherto unseen levels, and cohort TFRs appear to be dropping with them.

The above is, of course, a caricature of the paper. But frankly, I feel it is justified, because the paper itself creates a somewhat caricatured version of the position that many demographers working on gender, fertility and family formation have held and adapted over the years. In truth, there are some components of articles on the relationship between gender and fertility which, in hindsight, may have been a little too optimistic in their expectations of the future, and have not, frankly, aged very well.

But I think a closer reading of authors looking at the (Nordic) gender-fertility nexus really shows that gender roles in the public and private spheres were only ever a part of the story. The Nordic countries also had, and largely still have, robust social safety nets, active labour market policies, generous parental leave with father quotas, accessible high-quality childcare, relatively low income inequality, and so on (Hänninen et al. 2019; Esping-Anderson 1990; Askeland/Strauss 2018). It was the risk-pooling, gender-responsive bundle, not gender alone, that seemed to support both individual flourishing (and, as it happens, higher levels of happiness (Martela 2020)) and, plausibly, higher fertility outcomes than were available in, say, southern Europe or East Asia.

Nor did anyone, least of all Nordic scholars themselves, claim that these were perfect societies, even in the domain of gender relations. The recent evidence does

not reveal Nordic family instability for the first time. Rather, it suggests that some of the earlier signs of stabilisation have subsequently reversed. The Nordic model was held up as the best available approximation to an institutional environment in which family formation could be supported alongside female autonomy. Its value did not depend on the creation of a perfect society or a permanently self-sustaining demographic equilibrium. To judge the model as though it had promised either, and then to treat recent trends as proof of its failure, is not quite fair.

A similar point applies to the paper's careful documentation of declining union formation in the Nordic countries, including the work of *Cantalini et al.* (2024) on Sweden, *Jalovaara and Andersson* (2022) on Finland, and the comparative evidence on total first-marriage rates. But these important trends do not, by themselves, refute the broader institutional interpretation of the Nordic experience. The Nordic countries were associated not only with relatively high fertility, but also with comparatively stable unions and high reported relationship quality. The fact that fertility and union formation have both come under pressure since around 2010 is also consistent with the possibility that the wider institutional bundle, rather than gender egalitarianism alone, was supporting these outcomes and is now encountering pressures it was not designed to withstand.

3 Gender revolution theory (or, "gender revolution theory")

The paper offers a second-order critique that, I think, goes somewhat further than how I have interpreted the literature: it argues that the theoretical foundation of gender revolution theory rests on three assumptions, each of which, the author argues, is now of declining plausibility.

The first assumption is that human beings are biologically and psychologically conditioned to seek out sexual coupling and reproduction. Some formulations of gender revolution theory may assume a persistent underlying demand for partnership and children. But the paper converts this limited motivational premise into the much stronger proposition that humans are biologically and psychologically driven toward sexual coupling and reproduction. If anything, the Second Demographic Transition literature, within which much family-demographic theory of the last forty years sits, explicitly rejects any straightforward biological-imperative account of childbearing, and grounds itself instead in post-materialist values, individual autonomy, and the deliberate uncoupling of sexual life from reproduction (*Lesthaeghe* 2014). The point that effective contraception has decoupled the two is not a problem for the theoretical position many of us hold; it is constitutive of it. The author marshals this critique against a position I am not sure many people actually defend.

The second assumption is that women in particular want to bear and raise children at levels adequate for population replacement. Here the paper makes points with which I substantially agree, and which the gender-and-fertility literature has long taken seriously. The two-child norm is widely entrenched (*Sobotka/Beaujouan* 2014) (with important exceptions, particularly in Asia (*Chen/Gietel-Basten* 2024; *Chen et al.* 2026)), but the gap between stated ideals, intentions and realised fertility is well

documented. *Ní Bhrolcháin* and *Beaujouan* (2019) are properly cited; their critique of the "preferences exist and are stable" assumption is one I share. I think, though, that the paper places more theoretical weight on this assumption than the cited gender-revolution literature necessarily requires. The more interesting question is not whether women "want" replacement-level fertility in some abstract sense, but whether the lives people are actually able to construct across work, leisure, partnering and parenting are lives in which the families they hope to form, however many children that involves, can in fact be formed. That is where the action is, and that is what equity-based readings of the gender revolution are actually trying to get at, a point I will return to.

The same applies to the rising childlessness which the paper marshals as further evidence against the model. Childlessness, whether intended or not, sits at the intersection of partnering difficulty, biological constraints on later childbearing, intensive parenting norms and the work – family squeeze. The Pew evidence the paper itself cites, that the top reasons American adults aged 50 and over gave for not having had children were failing to find a suitable partner, not wanting children, and the catch-all "it just never happened", is consistent with this reading (*Paul* 2026: 419). None of these reasons tells us that gender egalitarianism has failed. They are at least consistent with a broader account in which life course interactions – e.g. partnering, timing, health and institutional constraints – jointly shape diverse pathways into childlessness (*Mynarska et al.* 2015; *Tocchioni et al.* 2022; *Raab/Struffolino* 2020).

The third assumption is that men will either acquiesce to or even embrace gender egalitarianism as the necessary price of family formation. The framing here, particularly "acquiesce" and "price", is revealing. It treats men's contribution to housework and childcare as a transactional cost extracted in exchange for reproductive cooperation. It is not how I understand the stronger versions of the equity argument, and it requires closer demonstration from the relevant texts (*McDonald* 2000; *Goldscheider et al.* 2015). The argument has been about equity: women should not be expected to combine full-time work in the public sphere with sole responsibility for the private sphere, because that is not fair, and because in conditions where it is the dominant arrangement, fertility, relationship quality and women's well-being all suffer. The paper does engage usefully with male political backlash, gender attitude divergence among the young, and the rise of right-wing populism in places like Sweden, all of which are important and is a point I will return to later. But framing the underlying position as one in which men's share of the dishes is the bargaining chip for fertility misses, I think, what many of us were actually saying.

A further point bears on the rather striking suggestion the paper draws from this material: that a shift in female attitudes towards "non-egalitarian gender complementarity", although admittedly difficult to imagine, would "almost surely" increase fertility well above current gender-egalitarian levels (*Paul* 2026: 419–420). The implicit empirical case for this claim is thin. Some of the lowest fertility rates in the world today are recorded in societies with strongly patriarchal gender norms: Iran, South Korea, much of the Caucasus, and parts of Southern Europe and East Asia (*Asadisarvestani/Sobotka* 2023; *Jones* 2019; *Kim* 2017). These examples do not establish that egalitarianism causes higher fertility, but they do show that

institutionalised patriarchy or complementarity is nowhere near sufficient to produce it. Patriarchy is no fertility guarantee, and in the contemporary world it often coincides with very low fertility indeed. The within-country finding that more “traditional” attitudes correlate with somewhat higher fertility ideals or intentions is real, but it sits within societies whose overall fertility levels are now uniformly low, and it does not licence the much stronger cross-society inference the paper invites.

4 Equity, fairness and the incomplete gender revolution

For me, this has always been more about equity and fairness than about prescription. *Esping-Andersen's* (2009) framing of the “incomplete gender revolution” captures it well. Women’s roles in the public sphere have been transformed beyond recognition over half a century; women’s roles in the private sphere have, with the partial exception of a handful of countries, scarcely shifted. With women shouldering both full participation in paid work and the bulk of unpaid domestic and care work, the dual burden is real, and the motherhood penalty is real. To be fair, the paper recognises that the female double shift is associated with worse fertility outcomes than gender egalitarianism. Where we differ is in what follows from that recognition. To put it in the language of *Ulrich Beck* and *Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim* (*Beck-Gernsheim* 2002; *Beck/Beck-Gernsheim* 2002), the ability of women to “write their own biography”, to construct a life that combines work, family and leisure on their own terms, is severely compromised. That compromise is a question of dignity before it is a question of demographic outcomes.

Consider what unfairness looks like in practice. You are in a relationship in which you are expected to cook, clean, care for your child and increasingly for your parents and in-laws, and work all day, with little real help from your partner. Your workplace offers limited flexibility and little structural support for parenting. Childcare, where it exists, is hard to access, costly, of variable quality, far from your workplace, and operating on hours that do not align with yours. Schooling is treated as your primary responsibility, getting your child into the right school is a competitive ordeal, and you are expected to keep up: with homework, with extracurriculars, and with the other mothers. There are not enough hours in the day. More importantly, it is just not fair. And in a world where you need to work but no longer need to reproduce, that unfairness translates, for many women, into a decision to forego childbearing altogether, to delay it past the point at which the family they imagined remains attainable, or to stop at one child when they would have wanted two.

Micro-level evidence is consistent with this. Where there is greater alignment within the household, whether through genuinely shared, progressive domestic arrangements or through an accepted and stable male-breadwinner model, fertility intentions may indeed be higher in some cases (*Miettinen et al.* 2011), but so too are relationship quality and reported happiness (*Park et al.* 2025; *Freeman et al.* 2018). New evidence even suggests that where there is misalignment on gender roles in the household (i.e. traditional wives with egalitarian husbands and egalitarian wives

with traditional husbands), there is a higher risk of cardiovascular disease for women (Sung *et al.* 2026).

5 Beyond gender: the work-leisure-family nexus

But, and this is the point I most want to make, it is certainly not a mainstream view to make the sustained argument that getting men to share the housework would, *by itself*, raise fertility rates back to replacement, nor should that have been the primary motivation for asking them to do so. Shared domestic work matters because it is part of the work-leisure-family nexus that women and their partners are trying to navigate, not because it is a fertility lever. Once one places gender within that broader nexus, and within the broader empirical and theoretical apparatus we have for thinking about fertility decision-making, including the Theory of Planned Behaviour and its descendants, the literature on perceived constraints and uncertainty, and work on aspiration formation under conditions of compounding risk, many other factors come into view. Some of these are large and partly exogenous: concerns about climate change, geopolitical conflict, economic precarity, the future of work itself. Others are more specific: the changing nature of work and the kinds of careers different generations are willing or able to pursue, shifting patterns of leisure consumption, the rising importance of housing and asset accumulation in shaping life-course transitions.

The key point is that work, family and leisure preferences do not need to add up to one hundred. They are not, contrary to how they are often modelled, a zero-sum allocation. When fairness exists, when employers and partners and communities offer support, when infrastructure is adequate, when services are good, when pressure is manageable, then the risks attached to any given life-course transition, such as changing jobs, getting married, or having a first or second child, are lower. Under those conditions, family and leisure, or family and work, are not the trade-off they are so often presented as being, but elements of an individualised choice that society should respect and support. Context, in short, matters enormously. In East Asia, men's contribution to domestic work remains very limited indeed, and that really does matter for whether women enter relationships and whether they have one or more children (Freeman *et al.* 2018). But we have also shown, empirically, that the single largest lever for shifting Chinese women's fertility preferences is the guarantee that their career progression at work will be protected (Zhang *et al.* 2025). Weak labour protection, attitudes about parenting and care, work culture and long working hours all matter, often more than the dishes. Esping-Andersen's incomplete gender revolution still has a very long way to go in the transformation of public-sphere roles, and that part of the revolution is, for most of the world outside a small Nordic core, scarcely begun. Add to that the housing crisis in many wealthy economies, stagnant or insecure wages, soaring costs of living, and welfare states that in many places have been hollowed out in the name of growth, and the risks attached to family formation are high indeed (Gietel-Basten 2019).

In other words, the so-called prescription of gender egalitarianism, however one defines it, is one component of a much larger project of reconciling the contemporary work-leisure-family nexus. Treating it as a freestanding policy lever, whose failure can be diagnosed by inspecting period TFR movements over a fifteen-year window, is treating it as something it never was.

6 What does “successful family (re)production” actually mean?

At the start of both that paper and this one, the concept of “successful family (re)production” was introduced. The phrase deserves scrutiny. The phrase risks importing a demographic definition of success in which fertility and union-stability indicators become the principal yardsticks. The question of what fertility rates are for, what they tell us, and whether their movements should drive policy is a much more open question than the paper’s framing allows.

For me, successful family production, or reproduction (either or both) is about enabling people to build the families they want, within the broader context of the working and leisure lives they want. Those lives and families should be healthy, free from poverty, happy, recognised, with rights and choices that can in fact be actioned, and engaged in decent employment. Families can be configured in whatever way they wish, and on this broader and more holistic view they can be successful in many forms. Numerical adequacy with respect to a replacement threshold is not the right yardstick for that kind of success, and demographic policy that takes it as the yardstick is liable to misfire, often against the very women whose reproductive choices it claims to want to support.

What we see in the Nordic countries, on this reading, is not simply that men have acquiesced in or embraced gender egalitarianism at home as the price of family formation. It is that an entire public and private infrastructure has been built up over the better part of a century to try to enable lives of this kind. For much of the history of the Nordic social welfare system, the motivation for building that infrastructure was not based on increasing the fertility rate. As such, its value does not stand or fall with the recent movements of those rates.

7 The “problems” of low fertility?

I get the sense in the paper that the author is frustrated at what seems to be an inadequate response among demographers to the “problems” of low fertility. This is made most explicit in the final paragraph, where the first line calls for a reckoning with the case for the (Nordic) gender egalitarian family model as a “solution to the problems of low fertility and family breakdown” (*Paul* 2026: 420). The Nordic gender egalitarian model, in isolation, is rarely if ever presented as the solution to the problems of low fertility, not least because what those problems actually are is not normatively or institutionally specified in the paper itself.

For me, the "problems of low fertility" are of two distinct kinds. The first concerns the inability of many people to write the biographies they want, including the families they want. Equity, of which gender equity is part, is constitutive of that problem and therefore part of any plausible response to it. The second concerns the structural consequences of sustained low fertility combined with very low mortality: population ageing, eventual decline, fiscal pressure on social welfare systems, slower economic growth, the renegotiation of intergenerational relations. Just as gender egalitarianism is not the only key to raising fertility rates, neither is raising fertility rates the only key to navigating these structural challenges. The two questions deserve to be kept analytically distinct.

Maybe I am conceding more than I need to, but I can see the author's frustration about what they see as a failure to tackle the "problems of low fertility", and I have to admit that some demographers, me included, have become "number deniers", reacting to the obsession over TFRs by perhaps going too far in the other direction and denying any role for demographic mitigation. A slower fall and a softer landing genuinely would help countries where fertility is currently in something close to free fall (*Sobotka* 2026). In countries with very low TFRs, an increase, even a modest one, would probably improve many outcomes and give institutions more time to adjust. If we were to improve the balance of lives better, enabling people to write their own biographies, and if the broad fertility-preferences literature is even approximately right about the gap between desired and realised family size, then fertility might well rise, or indeed fall more slowly, and that in turn might make some of the structural challenges easier to face. But that is not the primary reason why we should do it, and it will not be the only response available to us in the demographic paradigm we have entered.

8 "Eek"

The penultimate sentence of the paper reads: "This is not to say that this model of the family is not worth pursuing for deeper liberal values of gender egalitarianism, moral autonomy and individual freedom." Reading that, few social scientists, most of whom I think it is fair to say hold these liberal values dear, would disagree. But I had a strong sense that a "but" was coming. And indeed: "However those values will have to be balanced against the simultaneous interests of both the state and society in its own reproduction" (both quotes: *Paul* 2026: 420).

When I read this, I simply wrote "eek" in the margin. I will not second-guess the author, not least because under blind review I do not know who they are, and I am happy to give them the benefit of the doubt before reading the sentence as suggesting that gender equality could or should be sacrificed for the sake of pronatalism. (That is a view which is, sadly, becoming rather fashionable in some policy circles at present.) But two things deserve saying. First, supporting gender equity and supporting family formation are not mutually exclusive positions. The language of balancing risks presenting these goals as competing values, when much of the relevant scholarship has sought to align them. Second, if states and societies

were really interested in their own reproduction, they would do well to listen rather more carefully to what people, and especially women, actually want, and to pull their finger out in supporting them. More broadly, the history of pronatalist policy gives us reason to be wary of alternately bullying and bribing people into having children against their own best interests, to stop expecting women to do everything, and to make the difficult institutional choices about work, care, housing and time that the situation demands. In many papers, including my own (*Gauthier/Gietel-Basten* 2025; *Gietel-Basten et al.* 2022), it has been argued that there is no single thing policymakers can do to raise fertility rates. The task instead is to look holistically at why things are the way they are, and to respond to the needs people are actually calling out about.

9 Conclusion

In sum, the paper takes a specific predictive component of a specific gender revolution theory and shows that recent data do not bear it out. Its critique of the macro-level fertility-FLFP (female labour force participation) relationship is well made (*Kögel* 2004; *Matysiak/Vignoli* 2008). It draws useful attention to the mystery of the sharp drop in Nordic period TFR and the slower decline in cohort fertility (*Hellstrand et al.* 2022), and it brings back into demographic conversation the question of how the gendered attitudes of young men and young women may be diverging, and what the underlying reasons might be.

Where I part company is on the diagnosis. Very low fertility is best read as a symptom of broken institutions, including but not only the institutions that mediate gender. The conversation has long been pitched in terms of gender egalitarianism, the term the paper uses and the one around which the literature has been built, but a better word, I think, is equity. And the equity question does not stop at gender. A society in which (desired) family formation becomes possible and meaningful is one in which there is also equity across generations, across regions, across class, in how housing, work, care, education, leisure and security are distributed. Low fertility sits at the intersection of all of these. Equity in this broader sense is not a pronatalist instrument; it is a condition under which people, women in particular but not only, can make and act on the choices they want to make. If those choices happen to deliver fertility closer to replacement, all the better. If they do not, the response is not to roll back the conditions of equity, but to think harder about how to support people through what is, on any reading, a new and demanding demographic paradigm.

The paper rightly describes widening gender-political divergence, including young men's backlash against feminism, claims of male victimisation, ideological polarisation between young men and women, and "gender fatigue" among some Nordic men (*Paul* 2026: 419). These are all issues of critical importance to sociology, demography and policy today. They may also reflect a broader sense among many men and women that relations between them are not right, although the nature and sources of that dissatisfaction require careful investigation. There is no doubt that

many men and many women, in different ways, feel that things between them are not right, and that those feelings are often sharpened when children come along. What is needed in response is not less equity but more: more fairness, more support, more recognition that the dual burden as currently configured is unworkable. That may also mean reflecting honestly on why so many now perceive equity as a zero-sum game in which one person's gain is another person's loss. It does not have to be that way.

On the very day when I had to submit the final proofs for this article, a policy brief was published by Swedish demographer *Gunnar Andersson* (2026). This brief addresses precisely the question of why fertility rates have fallen in Sweden and what to do about it. *Andersson* makes the point I have tried to in this paper much more elegantly:

"Individual taxation, income-related parental leave and well-developed childcare have long allowed Swedes to combine employment and parenthood, and these structures remain intact. The fertility decline is not evidence that the [Swedish] model has failed. Policymakers should resist pressure to dismantle or radically overhaul it in response to the recent numbers: the problem lies elsewhere, and the risk is reforming the part of the system that still works."

Developing a better understanding of these problems – which then allows us to better respond to them – has to be our immediate priority.

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