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# WORKING PAPERS

SPS 2016/ 2 Department of Political and Social Sciences

## Patterns of Identity Innovation: An Emancipatory Potential

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EUI Working Paper **SPS** 2016/2

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ISSN 1725-6755

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Printed in Italy  
European University Institute  
Badia Fiesolana  
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
Italy  
[www.eui.eu](http://www.eui.eu)  
[cadmus.eui.eu](http://cadmus.eui.eu)

## **Abstract**

Everyday identity innovation is an important dimension of social change. It is at once personal and socially patterned. This working paper introduces the concept of identity innovation, proposes a typology of its patterns and shows that it provides a useful analytic tool in discussion of social division, conflict and conflict transformation. The argument is general, but builds on a range of micro-level studies undertaken by the author and others.

## **Keywords**

Identity innovation; reinterpretation; classification; emancipation; conflict resolution; everyday change; individual agency.



## Introduction

Social transformations have an everyday face in individuals' remaking of relations, revisioning of identity, and refinding of continuities with the past. That everyday face – I call it 'identity innovation' – comes in differing sequences. Marx saw it as contemporaneous with revolutionary praxis: 'the coincidence of self-change and changing circumstances' – and this idea has informed much social movement study.<sup>1</sup> It may also proceed out of phase with political change as a current in everyday life that produces secularization or new religious expressions (Ganiel 2016), everyday feminism and gender-egalitarian relations (Mansbridge and Flaster, 2007), or non-movement change in authoritarian regimes (Bayat, 2010). There are periods and places where it is ubiquitous, and places and periods where it is forced underground: Birtek (2007, p 34) describes the end of the Ottoman empire in Turkey (1912-22) as a time of rapid and radical individual repositioning, shut down by 1925; Polonsky (nd) describes a ferment of ideas and identity formation in the varied Jewish responses to modernity in 19<sup>th</sup> century Poland; the 1960s in the West and nearly half a century later the Arab Spring, are also such periods of identity innovation.

As the examples show, even when innovation is common it is not always transformatory, and the shutting down of change can be brutal. This is a weak force in opposition to political power and organized violence. But it can subvert informal and internalized power and change the habitus that reproduces it. Without such identity innovation, social movements lose their impetus, revolution reverts to older structures and institutions of conflict resolution are converted back to old modes of functioning. Thus analysis of the everyday processes of identity innovation is of wider social significance. Individual innovation is patterned, with similar choices and logics common to whole clusters of the population at particular times and places. Discovering the patterns of change and predictable obstacles to it shows how political policy can lessen the obstacles and support the patterns.

The analysis is immediately relevant to what are called 'identity conflicts'. There is a considerable literature on the conventional, social, discursive, often informal constitution of 'ethnic' division that reveals the multiplicity of mechanisms by which some divisions become sedimented and institutionalized, appearing as 'givens' in social discourse, institutional practices and everyday interactions (Wimmer, 2013). Much current discussion focuses on the movement into conflict, the highlighting of oppositions, the mobilization of bias through discourse, the social pressures and incentives to toe the communal line. It highlights the role of political leaders and community activists (Skey, 2011; Wodak, 2015). The agency of ordinary citizens is less well understood, either in subverting division or in strengthening conflict.

Individuals bypass and humanize such divisions in a multiplicity of ways, in home, work, neighbourhoods, leisure and politics. They do so not primarily by rejecting national or religious divisions but by reinterpreting them. In what follows, I show the range of ways that divisions can be subverted from below, not just by radical reclassifications but by subtler changes of meaning and value. Identity innovation frequently fails to make social impact, and

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<sup>1</sup> McAdam et al, 2001; Hobson, 2003; Melucci, 1996. Della Porta 2013, 39-69 shows such relationality not in movement out of conflict but into it.

its failure makes plausible right wing rhetoric about the inevitability of conflict and opposition. Some of those who support divisive and exclusionary policies are not die-hard racists but blocked innovators.<sup>2</sup> The appropriate response is neither condemnation, nor attempt to convert them to liberal ideals, much less an acceptance of divisive identity politics. It lies rather in removing the social obstacles to innovation, encouraging it to go farther and in a direction more likely to succeed, thus working with the grain of everyday change. Identifying the patterns of innovation and the obstacles to it helps us to free this positive potential.

In what follows, I begin with a contextual and conceptual situation of my argument, go on to present a general typology of trajectories of identity innovation that shows the logic of their functioning and their likely social impact. Then I show the relevance of this approach for analysis of identity conflicts. In conclusion, I return to the emancipatory thrust of the wider project.

## **Context and concepts**

### ***A critical interpretative approach***

Why move to a micro-level, interpretative analysis of identity innovation which takes seriously individual narratives when the tide of scholarship focuses on social cognition (Reicher,2012; Condor and Figgou, 2012), discursive grammars of nationality (Wodak, 1999 ), choice within and change of classificatory schema (Chandra,2012; Wimmer, 2013; Roth, 2012) and social movements of collective action (Melucci, 1996; della Porta, 2013)? There are six reasons for the strategy adopted here.

- i. The logic of individual identity change is important not because it is individual, but because individual processes of change converge.<sup>3</sup> Such convergent change has transformative potential, as Bayat (2010) has shown for ‘non-movement’ change in authoritarian regimes. The approach adopted here allows us to look at the logic of everyday change in analytic detail. It opens up empirical questions as to how far and when individual processes of rethinking converge, and with what social effects.
- ii. The ‘moment’ of individual rethinking and repositioning is a part of wider social transformation. Focussing on it allows us to analyse the beginnings and the reversals of change, not simply change carried through in practice. Thus it can give insight into those who don’t as well as those that do change away from given divisions.
- iii. This focus allows us to grasp the normative meanings of change, the ends in view from the perspective of the actors themselves. It does not presuppose that norms are effective, but it opens the question of the role and effectiveness of normatively informed change to empirical investigation
- iv. Interaction creates new meanings and new logics. But to understand this we have to grasp the understandings and anticipations of those who interact. Even in social movements, where interactive processes predominate, we need to see the distinctive convergent logics of

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<sup>2</sup> How many fall into this category is a matter for empirical research in each case. My point is that we have first to ask the questions who innovates and what are the blockages? This working paper is designed to provide a conceptual underpinning for such research.

<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu (1977) classically analysed the unorganized convergence of everyday perceptions and judgements.

collective identity at each level of what Melucci (1996) calls the ‘action system’ if we are to show the interrelations between levels.

v. In showing the individual moment of transformation, research can also show the mechanisms by which this is subverted socially and sometimes reversed personally. In short, it lets us focus on what Claus Offe (2015) calls ‘traps’: in this case, social structures and dominant ideologies generate incentives for forms of identity innovation that are almost guaranteed socially to fail.

vi. In these ways, the research strategy adopted here shows the (weak) emancipatory potential of everyday agency, and in so doing points to the ways that it could be made stronger.

### ***From classificatory struggles to everyday reinterpretations***

Much current sociological literature takes identity as a form of classification and shows how repositioning within or between given categorical schema is central to strategic alliance building and to the making and transformation of political and ethnic divisions.<sup>4</sup> Here I distinguish between strategic choices within and between categorical schema and the process of identity innovation which involves *reinterpretation* of the *meanings* of these categories, which is necessarily an evaluative process.<sup>5</sup>

Reclassificatory struggles are important when distinctions are formally embedded in state, law and institutions: reclassification of caste position can provide access to Indian government programmes; citizenship classifications in Northern Ireland - British or Irish or both – will become crucial to access the EU and its programmes after Brexit.

Reinterpretation is important where social divisions are at once informal and composite. Composite divisions occur where numerous distinctions – ethnic, religious, national, class - partially coincide. Then institutions in different fields express similar meanings and reinforce a sense of pervasive division from which individuals in the society have little prospect of exit. Informality – where self-assumed identity and mutual recognition is more important than formal ascription - gives considerable discretion of interpretation. Composite informal divisions characterise many ethnically divided societies (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998, pp. 76, 106; Hutchinson, 2005; Jenkins 2008) and more generally societies where legacies of past conquest and power are written on the landscape, in settlement patterns, and in a multitude of organisations and fields. In such societies, cultural grammars link fields and categories, creating (partial) homologues between different classificatory schema, providing a complex web of meanings which socialised actors routinely negotiate, and defining the nodes on which there is sharp conflict (see Todd 2015).

Composite divisions are institutionalised contingent historical products. They impact on individuals and social relations by generating real differences of perspective, judgement and valuation. Yet they are always fissile, resisting essentialist and foundationalist interpretations. There are constantly regenerated sites of contingency and lack of fit, where distinctions do not

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<sup>4</sup> See key texts by Chandra 2012; Wimmer 2013

<sup>5</sup> Lamont (2000) puts meaning-making central to her work on boundaries; for Wimmer, 2013, meanings are part of his map of categories but because his major interest is in state and nation making, analysis of meaning is recessive in his work; Chandra, 2012, pp 109-111, includes meaning (content) as part of her mapping of ethnic identity but not as a defining part.

coincide, where the arbitrariness of claiming one big division rather than differentiating distinctions becomes experientially clear.<sup>6</sup> Some of this dissonance is normative, for the norms generated in everyday practices often conflict with institutional imperatives and normative dissonance is a powerful trigger identity innovation.<sup>7</sup>

Where there are composite informal divisions, identity innovation is ubiquitous. Individuals in such divided societies constantly reposition themselves with respect to these divisions which are at once imbued with personalised meaning (Cohen, 2000 ) *and* with internalised power relations (a dominant language, or cultural capital associated with one habitus). As power relations loosen, and legal enforcement decreases, so too does identity innovation become public and contestation over both the meaning and the social impact of division becomes general.<sup>8</sup>

This provides an everyday potential for change. It is often assumed that divisive ethnic and national and religious distinctions are best countered by moving away from them – by shifting classificatory schema, by rejecting the categories themselves, by (symbolically) eradicating the basis of exclusion, by becoming European or cosmopolitan rather than national. The rationale for this view lies in the power of discursive grammars and the increasingly well-documented ways that exclusivist ethnic and national meanings are mobilised in discussion and by elites (for this mobilisation, see Wodak, 2015; Skey, 2011; Condor and Figgou, 2012 ). Yet it does not follow that the best way of change is by shifting classificatory schema. This may be counterproductive in the case of composite divisions where schema are interrelated rather than discrete and where classificatory shift conceals the reproduction of meaning. As I argue below, in such cases shifting classificatory schema is less effective in countering division than reinterpreting meanings. Indeed in the hardest cases, whether the individual repositions within a given schema or shifts schema, considerable transformation of meaning is also necessary to move away from division.

### ***Individual identity innovation***

The concept of identity – the preserve of psychologists and quantitative social scientists – is notoriously unwieldy.<sup>9</sup> In sociology, it has been criticised for explaining little, and for discouraging critical analysis of the meanings and makings of social solidarities and divisions (Brubaker and Cooper, 2002; Malešević, 2006). And yet the phenomena in question– the

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<sup>6</sup> This liminality and these gaps increase as cultural logics diverge from social practices, and as niches of ‘in between’, ‘mixite’, ‘others’ emerge. See Rodrigues Garcia, 2015. For liminality even in exclusivist closed divisions, see Sion, 2014

<sup>7</sup> This is the evidence from the Irish cases. Such changing understandings, expectations and identities among ordinary citizens do not need to be constant or frequent to have effect: one experience can set in motion individual innovation and one individual can have exemplary and ripple effects. Green and Seher 2003 pp 515-6 note the evidence that the pressure to conform dissipates with even one dissenter.

<sup>8</sup> For an initial mapping of boundaries (divisions) in terms of their closure or permeability and the degree of enforcement of this, see Lamont and Bail, 2005 ; for an insightful analysis of the different degrees of informality in different fields of distinction-making and its relation to inequality, see Brubaker, 2015, 19-35. The role of reinterpretation or reclassification will vary in the different types of case.

<sup>9</sup> Ashmore et al (2004) note the multiple measurable dimensions for each identity category, each of which forms the basis of a particular strand of psychological research.

personalised perspectives, values and relations that are linked in self-perception and other-ascriptions to social divisions and institutional bases – are undeniably politically important.<sup>10</sup>

My approach is to focus not on identity per se, with its myriad of individual, interrelational and socio-collective meanings, but on the social patterning and impact of individual-level change away from social divisions and symbolic understandings of those divisions. When I write of identity innovation I mean the ways that individuals (re)position themselves with respect to wider social divisions, categories (Tajfel, 1981) and roles (Stryker, 2000), and conventional expectations and modes of ‘social cognition’ (Condor and Figgou, 2012). By social divisions, I intend not simply social categories but the composite social and cultural configurations that are expressed in categorical terms. When I write of repositioning, I do not primarily intend shifting self-categorisation but rather reinterpretation of the meanings that give significance to categories, and a related change in the individual’s mode of practical engagement with the social and cultural configuration. This is conceived as engagement, sustained reflection, exploration, commitment, practice, interaction (sustained well beyond the momentary but not necessarily over a significant period of months or years) (see Schwartz, 2001). It is often expressed in narrative form that shows both continuity and change (Breakwell, 1996). This conceptualization allows us to look empirically at individual identity innovation as meaningful, directional and as socially patterned.<sup>11</sup>

Individual identity innovation is loosely analogous to firm-level innovation in economics. Just as firm-level innovation does not necessarily lead to growth either in the firm or in the economy as a whole, so identity innovation is not always sustained individually or socially. Indeed, unlike in the ideal market economy, power and vested interests may ensure that identity innovation does not spread at the individual level or spread socially. Just as firm-level innovation presupposes an industry ‘frontier’ which it breaches, so identity innovation presupposes societies where there are discernible social practices and grammars of division from which it moves away. While firm innovation is normally technological or perhaps organizational, identity innovation can take place on a wider range of dimensions – class, gender or the composite ethno-religio-national divisions in Ireland or Israel-Palestine.

Identity innovation is not immediately correlated with particular political choices. However it orients individuals towards some choices and against others; it immunizes them against some forms of rhetoric and opens them to others; it lets them intuitively connect to some groups and mistrust others. The gap between identity innovation and political choice constitutes a section of the population as ‘swayers’, open to alternative arguments. In a divided society, if innovation remains resonant rather than radical (to use Ferree’s (2003) term) it opens individuals to recurrent choices between compromise and repolarisation. Such swayers are a crucial constituency in divided societies.

Individual identity innovation is sometimes dismissed as socially unimportant. When ‘the chips are down’, it is said, those who innovate vote with their feet for segregation or exclusion; and collective and collaborative cognition often reverses processes of innovation. It

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<sup>10</sup> For an attempt to break the paradigmatic deadlocks over the use of the term ‘identity’ and ‘identity change’, see Rumelili and Todd, forthcoming 2017.

<sup>11</sup> In work presently being completed, I have done this for the two parts of Ireland. This involves a multi-phased process of analysis, including a grounded theory identification of themes in interviews, and triangulation of these interviews with other data in interpretative and contextual analysis.

is, however, mistaken to dismiss identity innovation as mere hypocrisy. Hypocrisy, the verbal affirmation of an alternative perspective while in private reaffirming the given identity, is an important phenomenon but it is not the same as innovation that is later reversed (Smithey, 2011). The distinction is important for comparative and policy purposes, just as it is important to see what types of innovation are most vulnerable to reversal.

### **Typology of identity innovation**

In the literature on ethnicity, identity change is normally seen as a mode of repositioning within a given set of categories or a changing of classificatory schema. I argue below that this limits our potential to grasp change in situations of composite division and instead suggest a typology of modes of reinterpretation, based not simply on changing classification but also on changing rules, meaning, argumentation and directionality.<sup>12</sup>

#### ***Repositioning within a given classificatory schema***

Repositioning has been analysed logically by Chandra (2012). This form of change is most likely when there is a high authoritative ascription of classificatory schema and clear rules of reference within – when the schema have official, quasi-legal force.

On Chandra's analysis, the individual's choices are normally limited by the given classificatory schema (the range and relation of categories in a particular field), the attribute schema (the range and relation of properties necessary to make a meaningful claim to category membership), the rules linking attributes and categories (the parameters of reference of the categories) (Chandra, 2012, pp. 105-109, 132-5 ). Repositioning is thus possible within the rules of the schema, limited by the attributes that the individual possesses or can attain.<sup>13</sup> In turn, each set of categories bounds a given class membership. Category shift always involves a different, larger or smaller, class membership. When it happens collectively, it is a product of brokerage and interest, and it may involve revaluation (Wimmer, 2013).

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<sup>12</sup> This echoes Wodak's insistence on the need to distinguish themes, syntactic modes, and topoi.

<sup>13</sup> There are also interlinkages between classificatory (categorical and attribute) schema such that there is an enormous amount of potential identity categories, interlinked in a complex web of partial homology and intertranslatability (eg 158) and over time the rules change (eg p. 169). But Chandra's central focus is on individual repositioning in terms of the existing rules.

**Table 1: Repositioning in a given schema**

General mechanism	Empirical types	Categories and attributes	Epistemology, ontology	Values	Costs and benefits,	Sustainability and impact
<b>Shifting self within given schema. High authoritative ascription; low discretion of interpretation of meaning. No change of the ‘rules’ only of the individual within them.</b>	<b>Traditional conversion in a dyadic classificatory schema</b>	Content and categories and valuation reversed within given (oppositional) classificatory schema which remains unchanged. Attributes changed to permit this. Classic religious conversion.	Certainty – embracement of convert role Particular values of new tradition embraced (old overturned). Transvaluation		Costs: Loss of roots and old networks Benefits: gain of new networks Individually sustainable, but no impact on social division.	
	<b>Repositioning among plural categories, fission or fusion</b>	Movement within a given set of categories. Early 20 <sup>th</sup> century redefinition of Irish Unionists as Ulster Unionists. Late 20 <sup>th</sup> century shift from Ulster and Irish to British self-reported identity. Repositioning on a racial continuum (da Silva and Reis, 2012).	Strategic self-interest Revaluation (movement to higher status category).		Benefits are primarily strategic: identifying with bigger, or smaller group. Older identity categories may remain recessive, and networks still extant.	

Conversion (Snow and Machelek, 1984) is a radical form of individual change particularly so when the classificatory schema is dyadic and the individual moves from one side to the other. This may require considerable remaking of individual attributes, whether in the form of religious learning, or of ethno-national resocialisation. Other forms of repositioning are possible between different classificatory levels: shifting upwards to more general or downwards to more particular categories thereby (if the move is general) permitting strategic redrawing of group boundaries sometimes without any necessary change of attributes.<sup>14</sup>

Where repositioning is individual, it does not change boundaries (Barth, 1969). Where it is convergent it does. Mass conversions, language change that underlies nationality shift, redrawing of group boundaries, take cascade-like form since, once a threshold point is reached, it becomes in the interest of all to follow and not to be left as a marginalized minority (Laitin, 1998).

This way of conceiving change leaves rules untouched, changing only in the long term, and meanings unanalyzed. Yet as Wimmer (2013, pp 50-63) points out, repositioning may also

<sup>14</sup> Wimmer, 2013, 73, calls this shifting topography, as distinct from changing meaning

involves assertion of new meanings and values and may bring more change in rules than is allowed on the model above. So for example, a slight change of attributes (an individual's change of name or of self-presentation,) may allow double-inclusion in previously exclusive categories (Irish and Nigerian) thus implicitly changing exclusivist categories to plural and compatible ones.<sup>15</sup> Repositionings often involve the creation of new linkages across previously separated groups, and the correlative revision of 'group narratives' (Ashmore et al 2004 ). In some cases – Roy (2013 , 178 ) mentions conversions to new religions in North Africa – they have transformative impact, introducing unexpected resonances and meanings, cutting anticipated linkages between fields, and thus functioning as a mode of deconstruction and modernization of traditional societies. For these reasons, repositioning can be seen as a special case in the broader context of reinterpretation of rules and meanings.

### ***Switching between given 'set package' classificatory schema***

This requires that discrete classificatory schema and related authority-structures are available. It has been discussed most usefully in studies of migration (Roth, 2012; Waters 1999, 62-3). Roth has outlined how shifting takes place between the dyadic racial schema used in the USA and a more complex plural racial schema in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, each with differential degrees of exclusivity, and different relations to national and other fields. Such situational shifting to and fro between extant schema – Waters notes it happens several times in one day – can have lasting effect. Roth argues that it has transformed the once-dyadic US racial schema.

Shifting can also take place between fields, where the schema are kept discrete and the shift represents a lasting commitment. According to Weber (1976) a mass change from a class to a national schema occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as peasants became French. In this case the topography and the politics of difference changes.

Distinct from the socially transformatory shifts discussed above is the everyday and constant situational shifting between classificatory schema used in differing fields – what Goffman (1959) called the presentation of self in daily life - which allows for flexibility in interrelations while for the most part leaving the existing schema untouched.

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<sup>15</sup> For other examples drawing on the migrant experience, see Levitt, 2005; Bursell, 2012.

**Table 2: Switching between classificatory schema**

<b>General mechanism</b>	<b>Empirical types</b>	<b>Categories and attributes</b>	<b>Grammar</b>	<b>Ontology, epistemology</b>	<b>Values</b>	<b>Costs and benefits,</b>	<b>Sustainability and impact</b>
<b>Shifting classificatory schema</b> (assumes a choice of authoritative discrete schema).	<b>Shifting within fields to alternative schema</b>	Situational shifting between different racial schema, for example by migrants..		Situational shift in values. Cultural relativism		Significant benefits in flexibility and negotiability of relations and with possible over time impact.	
	<b>Shifting sideways between fields as commitment</b>	Movement from one to another frame of understanding as a commitment: for example from national to religious or socialist identity and frame of understanding, or from class to national frame		New values, new alliances		Costs: loss of roots and solidarities Benefits: gain of new resources and allies.	
	<b>Situational shifting between fields</b>	Situational switching between self-presentation as religious, political, class, familial, job or national categories		Change in roles consistent with continuity in encompassing values		Few individual costs Much individual benefit in situational flexibility. Little impact on existing schema.	

In societies where there are composite divisions, schema-switching seldom makes a lasting difference to boundaries or identities. Rather than competing schema within a particular field, contest is built into the categories and rules in use in that field (Hutchinson, 2005). What appears as a major shift (for example from a British or Irish to a Northern Irish self-reported identity) may simply be a specification of the existing schema; the new category is implicitly subsumed within the old ones.<sup>16</sup> Shifting between fields has little impact when fields interpenetrate and schema are largely homologous. So, as Lybarger (2007) shows in Gaza, his respondents’ shift from national Palestinian to religious Islamic schemas changes the subjective form, conceptual and moral resources, and potential alliances and resources that

<sup>16</sup> Most of those who switch are northern Irish (within the Irish categorisation) or Northern Irish (ie. A regional variant of British), and relatively few are Northern Irish regionalists. For discussion see Hayes and McAllister, 2013 70-74 .

they can access, but is aligned with the same relation with the Israeli Other, at most modifying the grammar of division but not radically changing it. Rather than providing a paradigm shift, the national themes are reintegrated into the religious meanings in a reinterpretative process that modifies rather than replaces the older division.<sup>17</sup>

In societies with composite divisions, few categorical schema remain unappropriated. Thus it is difficult, in Wimmer's terminology, to change the topography of division. Cosmopolitan values are typically appropriated by imperial states, and often remain tied to particularist judgements and used to delegitimize the struggles of dominated groups (see Osterhammel, 1997; Calhoun, 2007). Labourist and feminist identities are coloured by the ways the division of labour and family structure are organized by ethno-national divisions: thus in Northern Ireland there have been 'orange' and 'green' socialists, and republican and state-centred feminists while cosmopolitanism has long been used by sections of the unionist elite to argue against 'narrow' [Irish not British] nationalism (see variously McGarry and O'Leary, 1995 ; Ruane and Todd, 1996; Hoewer, 2014 ).

***Reinterpretation of the rules, meanings and values associated with a given identity.***

Reinterpretation requires considerable discretion of interpretation in the rules and meanings surrounding identity categories and negotiability in the practices assumed to follow. The empirical types of change discussed here are based on patterns of change that I have found to be common in the Irish cases; of course the list is not intended as exhaustive. I distinguish the types in terms of change in meaning (incorporating category, grammar, content), and change in directionality (incorporating ontology, epistemology, mode of argumentation and values).<sup>18</sup> From this follows the impact - the costs and benefits of each choice and its sustainability in different circumstances.

Reinterpretation is carried on by organic intellectuals on behalf of the group, by activists, and by ordinary citizens.<sup>19</sup> It can take more or less radical forms, potentially subverting the authority of official classifications and implicitly changing the meaning and legitimation of existing hierarchies. How it proceeds when it meets convergence or resistance from others depends as much on the type of innovation as on the type of interaction.

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<sup>17</sup> Mitchell and Todd 2007 outline how this occurs in Northern Ireland when Protestants dismayed by the perceived 'defeat' of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, switched from a prioritization of a national-political schema to the prioritization of an evangelical-religious schema and later switched back to a more moderate version of the older national-political schema.

<sup>18</sup> While this builds on Todd 2005, there I proposed ideal types while here I outline an empirical typology.

<sup>19</sup> For philosophical discussion of the importance of such reflexion upon particularity and reinterpretation based upon it, see Benhabib, 2006; 2011.

**Table 3: Types of identity innovation: reinterpretative strategies**

Types		Meaning			Directionality		Impact	
General mechanisms	Empirical types	Categories	Content/meaning	Grammar	Epistemology/ontology/argumentation	Values	Costs and benefits,	Sustainability and impact
<p><b>Reinterpreting the given schema</b></p> <p><b>Wide discretion of interpretation; low authoritative ascription. Permits everyday agency and bottom up change.</b></p>	<b>Reaffirmation</b>	Clarifying categories, removing ambiguities, emphasising oppositions. Removing exceptions, liminality, blurred or flexible rules in favour of clear and dyadic ones			Certainty, binary oppositions, values of purity, tradition.		Benefit: Self-esteem, end of anxiety Cost: conflict.	
	<b>Reinterpretation within the tradition</b>	Changing the meaning of a given tradition, revising it as did Irish republicans, Basque nationalists, Egyptian youth			Incremental value change from within tradition, using modes of argumentation from the tradition:		Part of the process of endogenous change, very typical of all traditions, all social identities. Does not immediately impact on inter-group relations, but may do so over time	
	<b>Universalistic affirmation</b>	Retaining identity category, content and grammar, but emphasising those aspects that express universal values. USA as the 'land of the free' . French civic republican universalism.			Defining the universalistic essence of the identity (republican equality and laicite) and using this to judge all particular practices (wearing of crosses, burkinis).		Costs: difficulty of distilling the universal from the particular. Weighting towards particular perspective. Reproduces opposition. Benefits: retaining and legitimating valued identity and (in best case) improving intergroup relations.	
	<b>Pluralisation</b>	Category, content and grammar kept more or less intact. Emphasising inclusive aspects of narrative content and compatibility of different positions.			Certainty in the 'basics' of identity while change at the margins. Double set of values, pluralist equality, mutual respect, and particular values of tradition. Argumentation 'I will respect your cultural identity and you must respect mine.'		Cost: Unstable equilibrium where initial opposition strong. Open to in-group pressure, out-group rejection and reversal Benefit: Maintains identity while improving social relations. Strong strategic alliances kept. Least sustainable where most needed.	
	<b>Privatisation</b>	Move down to functional role rather than type categories, rejection of previous categories, content, valuation, grammar.			Values of 'hard days work' or 'family life'  Argumentation often consequentialist: 'national identity causes conflict, therefore I reject it.'		Cost: restricted public participation Benefit: safety, freedom of movement, resilience against stigmatisation Individually sustainable, little chance of spread and liable to generational reversal.	
	<b>transformation</b>	Changing content, rules and equivalences: rebuilding identity boat while sailing in it. Democracy (in Dewey's concept). May end with revision of categories themselves, for example the South African Rainbow Nation.			Openness, exploration, reflexion, autonomy, fallibilism . Processual values and arguments rather than means-ends. Refusal of closure: non-groupist.		Costs: Marginalisation and in-group disapproval Benefits: Freedom, independence, openness Individually sustainable given safe niches, generationally expansive	

### Reaffirmation

In this mode, the individual casts aside ambiguities and uncertainties about boundaries, treats complex and composite identities as simple essential ones and identifies strongly and uncritically with the wider group, giving strong moral justifications of self- and group- stance. It is common in situations of protracted conflict, and amongst those who feel a strong sense of threat (Bar-Tal 2013; Abulof 2015). Sometimes those who move to such a strong polarizing sense of group identity do so while becoming politicized or militarized and one certainly finds reaffirmers amongst political and military activists in Northern Ireland (Bosi and de Fazio , 2017 forthcoming).

It is less clear how far and when this stance is adopted by ordinary citizens. In Northern Ireland, I have found that many citizens intermittently sway to support extremist politicians on particular policy choices, while retaining much more flexibility in their everyday relations, and sometimes swaying back later to more moderate politics. Many are serial swayers – often failed pluralisers - rather than committed reaffirmers.

### Universalistic affirmation

Universalistic affirmers find general values in their particular identities. They focus on group-specific roots and rights, and the traditional narratives around these, but find within them more important human values. Argumentation is on the basis of these values – democracy, justice, freedom. Specific judgements do not, however, always escape the particular perspective: so for example some advocates of republican laicite take the headscarf (not the cross) as problematic, and ban the burkini (not the wetsuit or the beach-dress).

This stance promises at once to retain the valued identity and increase self-esteem, at the same time as reaching out to promote better relations. However it is difficult to draw out the universalisable from the particularistic aspects of the tradition, particularly where divisions are composite, and tempting simply to universalise the particular perspective and thus reproduce opposition. Its universalising message may, however, not be vulnerable to in-group pressure and out-group rejection. Where divisions are deep and composite, those who undertake this project have to transform their identity (cutting links, revising narratives) in the process of drawing out its universalistic content. Thus for example reformist evangelicals in Northern Ireland emphasise the universal truth of the Bible and cut the traditional linkage between Protestant evangelical religion and unionist politics (Mitchell and Ganiel, 2011).

### Pluralisation

Pluralisation is a mode of everyday practice with the aim of peaceful coexistence and mutual recognition between existing groups. It keeps much of the given identity – the category, rules of reference, content, solidarities – but amends it to allow coexistence and permeability between groups, and it sees all existing groups as equally valuable. Thus it resonates with the ideology of multi-culturalism. It is guided by a two-levelled value system: the desire to keep the particular content of its own tradition together with recognition of the equal value of all such particular traditions. It argues for compromise with minimal change in one's own or others' traditions: one can accept the others as they are. It is common among those striving for equality for their group, or those who have recently achieved such equality.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Thus it is most common in my research amongst nationalists in Northern Ireland.

Pluralisation is an attractive option because it promises to keep solidarity and continuity while improving relations. Yet it is vulnerable to in-group pressure – since it keeps most of the in-group values, shared narratives and grammar – and to out-group rejection of the proffered changes. It is most difficult where it is most necessary, in composite divisions where the identities are opposed one to another on a range of dimensions, where differing modes of interaction are held as normal, where the delineation of the public sphere is in question and there is no agreed public frame of what counts as fair and equal change. In such cases mutual accommodation may require very significant changes in expectations, practices and values, with resentment that the other does not equally change. It is easy to sway back to oppositional identities. Indeed pluralists are often ‘swayers’, trying for compromise, failing and retrenching, trying again.

#### Privatisation

Privatisation promises escape from conflict and division by shrinking the fields of engagement to the job, family and leisure activities which are not so charged with opposition. It allows escape from some security problems and it gives a certain psychological resilience since one no longer identifies with the group stigmatized or the norms to which one may be pressured to conform. It is a form of stoicism, practically good when there is little public hope. Its arguments are consequentialist: what is important is safety and individual and family progression; where religious or national opposition threatens this, the individual opts out. Safety is bought, however, at the cost of influence and leverage on public issues. Even more important, it leaves little legacy for the next generation. The socially dominant meanings of division remain uncriticised and ready to be adopted and the second generation easily slips into them.

#### Transformation

Transformation reconstitutes divisions by changing radically and without limit their meaning, thereby removing justifications for exclusion and changing legitimations of power relations. It may qualify the grammar, for example by retelling narratives or changing practices, implicitly adding categories and making new distinctions, so that previous dyadic categories (British or Irish, Protestant or Catholic) can credibly be said to be conjoinable and old equivalences (British = Protestant) are rejected. Through everyday practices it highlights historical contingency, deconstructs the composite divisions, refinds lost opportunities and reconstructs meaning around them. Above all, transformation is ongoing. It does not remap divisions but deconstructs them, and is principledly non-groupist. It is focused on what John Dewey calls 'ends in view' rather than final resting points, and has much of his 'democratic' aims of freeing activity and opening options, rather than accepting isolation and closedness (Dewey, 1916, 86-7, 105). It works by what he calls the 'true individualism' of the 'development of agencies for revising and transforming previously held beliefs' (Dewey, 1916, 305). Its modes of argumentation are iterative, dialogic, without taking any axioms as uncriticisable; it values process as much as product.

The process of transformation may be focused primarily on local divisions (Protestant vs Catholic in Northern Ireland) or it can move to wider national ones (British vs Irish; European vs British), or to global ones (the West vs the rest). It has the aim of overcoming the limitations, injustices and power-legacies embodied in the given identity. While in benign social circumstances, transformation may be incremental and smoothly accomplished, in societies with deep composite divisions it is more likely to be radical and crisis-ridden as seemingly core aspects of identity are revised or rejected.

Since it criticizes divisions ‘from within’, transformation is seen as subversive and meets with strong in-group rejection. It is resilient to collaborative cognition by the in-group, since it has rationally reconstructed the grammar and meaning of the identity, but it is vulnerable to marginalization and intimidation. It has a major impact on the next generation potentially freeing them from the given grammar of division.

This empirical typology makes no claim to be exhaustive. Reinterpretation is creative and different conjunctures lead to differently patterned individual choices. Yet even this limited typology highlights the parallels and contrasts between identity change in different social contexts.<sup>21</sup>

The typology also helps explain the choice of change. Since each type of innovation involves differing degrees of dependence on the in-group and vulnerability to out-group rejection, the choice is highly likely to vary with specific stages of struggle and power relations. For example, resisting inequality and stigmatisation is likely to demand strong in-group solidarity: Lamont et al (2016) have found that appeals to group identity increase social resilience. Such movements often adopt pluralist (liberal nationalist) or universal-affirmationist (civil rights) claim-making, working from a strong group solidarity and tradition. Once horizontal inequality is remedied, however, continuing exclusions and mobilisations of bias by powerful institutions of church, state or political party are likely to demand fission rather than fusion, a distancing from immediate ‘we’ feeling, a critique of groupness in order to criticise how the given group has been constructed. This has been the case in 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland, North and South. Identity innovation thus becomes a way for individuals to develop their own resources to make more effective interventions in a still-divided society (cf Fleming et al, 2012 ).

Identity innovation is not always successful, but its failures are patterned and predictable. When it fails, individuals are faced with the knowledge that their aims – the compromise for which pluralists hope, or the acceptance of universalisers’ principles – were rejected by others. Whether this leads them to more radical self-change, to reaffirmation, or to a living with the contradictions between their aims and their achievements, depends crucially on their social context and resources, and the ways in which available opportunities are framed politically and ideologically.

### **Identity conflicts and the traps of change**

Identity innovation is pervasive in the modern world and it provides a resource for wider social change. However obstacles to innovation are easily framed in ‘identity’ terms that feed conflict.

Adapting Offe’s (2015) discussion of ‘traps’ – where structural conditions both require reform and generate no actors with both capacity and incentive to carry forward the changes

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<sup>21</sup> For example, earlier versions of this typology (Todd 2005) have been used to think about identity change among medical and academic teams (Albert et al, 2015); in remakings of religious distinctions (Mitchell and Ganiel, 2011); in gender mobilisation (Hoewer, 2014); in conflict transformation practices (Smithey, 2011); in struggles against stigmatisation (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012)

necessary – we can define an identity trap as one where the socio-political divisions require change, while incentivising actors to adopt modes of identity innovation almost guaranteed to fail. Identity traps are set not by identity but by socio-political structures and they vary in their tightness, their spatial range (from local to transnational) and the opportunities of escape. In the discussion that follows I show how this refocusing of attention away from ‘identities’ to identity innovation and the institutional obstacles to it, provides a fruitful perspective for understanding the logic of different ‘identity conflicts’, while providing a normative parameter for resolving them.

### ***Pluralist traps: refocusing the ‘problem’ of migration in England***

Pluralisation is the everyday attempt to reach a fair balance with others where each is equally recognised and respected in their values and traditions. But without common normative and institutional frames, reversals are inevitable because it is far from clear where the final equilibrium is to lie and attempts to reach it are vulnerable to in-group pressure and out-group rejection. In England even individuals with good will and belief in fair play tend intermittently to be swayed to racist or anti-immigrant statements in focus groups and by the media (Skey, 2011). The process is exploited by right wing populists (Wodak, 2015).

Political commentary has itself swayed in response, sometimes blaming grass-roots extremists, sometimes complacent elites. It is instead necessary to analyse the lack of fit between the aims of and the resources for pluralist identity innovation, and the uneven distribution of those resources.

Pluralisation is particularly difficult where group identities are strong and are asymmetric. In Britain in the past it was possible because the strongest population demographically – ‘the English’ – had but a weakly affirmed identity, while other groups and regions with stronger ‘identities’ could be integrated into English-centred and highly class-stratified institutions.<sup>22</sup> The devolution settlement of 1998, the threat of Scottish independence and most recently Brexit have cast this institutional and ideological frame in question, requiring greater articulation of the principles underlying state policy. They have also problematized ‘the English’: many of Condor’s (2000, 2010) respondents in England in the 2000s were unsure how to speak of ‘this country’ (see also Fenton, 2007), and the UKIP ‘English nationalist’ vote has risen.

Until recently, tensions associated with migration have been negotiated into a pluralist equilibrium through local institutions and practices (Hickman et al, 2012, trace some of the successes here). The problem arises when the issues are articulated in general groupist terms. To accommodate ‘the Sikhs’ in the police, or ‘the Scots’ in devolution is problematic if large tranches of the population are left with no way to include themselves as claim-makers in their own plural and multi-cultural ideals. In consequence in focus-groups ‘the English’ are routinely named in an ethnicised and racialised way, even by individuals who explicitly hold multi-cultural ideals (Skey, 2011). Thus a vulnerability to racist political rhetoric is unsurprising. If pluralist equilibria are to be found, groupism (in ideology and in policy) has to be dropped and an agreed frame of political values articulated that will permit accommodation between highly asymmetric populations, interests and identities.

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<sup>22</sup> See Kumar 2003 on the importance of the imperial heritage for the non-articulation of English national identity.

### *Cosmopolitan traps: national conflicts*

It is sometimes argued that identity conflicts are generated by nationalisms, and indeed by any appeals to nationality or the nation. Seeking out nationalist premises, avoiding national tropes, eradicating national feelings, is then seen as the key to conflict resolution. This is misguided cosmopolitanism. In some cases protracted national conflict is based not on oppositional national identity but rather on issues of citizenship and democracy, interest and power. Ideological identity politics - cosmopolitanism quite as much as extreme nationalism - disguise the issues at stake and encourage zero-sum conflict dynamics.

'Basque nationalism' is a case in point. It is often incorrectly seen as more extreme than other forms of nationalism. Of course there have been extreme nationalists in the Basque Country, in particular in ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna) and related organisations. But what needs to be explained is why the moderates were unable to maintain a momentum after the institutionalisation of autonomy in 1979 and unable to marginalise ETA; why sections of the population up to the present continue to be attracted to radical nationalist parties. Almost all of the specialist literature shows that this is not because of 'nationalism', at least not at the popular level. The Basque public have consistently been open to plural and hybrid (Basque and Spanish) more than exclusivist (Basque only, or Spanish only) identities (Keating, 2001; Peral, 2013). Basques have been more welcoming of immigrants than other parts of Spain (De La Calle and Miley, 2008). Although Basque nationalism was articulated as an essentialist and racialist nationalism by Arana in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, this was transformed into a cosmopolitan citizenship-oriented outlook by the mid-century (Mees, 2003).

In fact, Basque nationalism has been a vehicle for a diverse set of commitments and affinities; these include a distinctive form of economic and industrial organization along principles of subsidiarity. Goikoetxea (2013) has argued that this has been understood as an egalitarian concept of consensual democracy; it has met with considerable success and allowed escape from the worst effects of austerity after 2008. A key axis of Basque-Spanish conflict then lies not in Basque 'ethnicity' or 'nationalism', but rather in a commitment to a particular form of 'demos' and socio-economic organisation and related practices.

Herein lies the identity trap, not for Basques but for Spanish centrists. Following Goikoetxea's analysis, the centrist Spanish grammar of nationality (part-defined by the 1978 Constitution) differentiates economic and social policy from nationality and nationalism, and thus does not allow the Basque position to be comprehensible. In effect, the rules of public discourse tend to silence Basque interests and arguments, or force them to be articulated in nationalist form. Centrist appeals to universalism, citizenship orientation and away from narrow nationalism are thus bound to be counter-productive: it is the form not the fact of citizenship that is at issue. In this case, the 'traps' that preclude resolution lie at the state and European level: they hinder elites from finding adequately creative concepts of citizenship and economic ordering. Appeals to cosmopolitanism serve simply to legitimate this failure.

### *Border conflicts*

Great power interests, imperial conquests and partitions have created state borders that confine some populations in situations that they would not have chosen. There is now a sophisticated literature on the transborder logics of conflict in such cases, focussing largely on national

frames and state interests.<sup>23</sup> This literature shows causal mechanisms at work, but it gives little analytic handle on the relative justifications of the respective claims. A refocus of attention from national affinities to the prospects of identity innovation allows us to see why the cases are so different, why they are sometimes so hard to resolve, and gives parameters for dialogic change.

Not all claims for transborder arrangements or border change are morally equivalent. If in some cases the claims appear little more than ploys of extreme nationalists (Baubock, 2010), in others the intent seems rather to unlock complex conflicts and to moderate extreme views (Todd, 2011). International law draws a single moral line: only in colonial situations is there a right to secession. Yet there is an arbitrariness in this ruling, since where colonial situations begin and end is contested and fuzzy (Lustick, 1993 ; Ruane, 1992 ). If, however, we reframe the analysis from identity (of co-nationals) to identity innovation and the traps that prevent it, we open the discursive field to a set of non-nationalist arguments on the politics of borders, thus creating space for substantive dialogue on these questions.

From this perspective, a claim for trans-border institutions or border change based simply on given national cultures, identities and affinities is a weak claim. A stronger argument is given by showing that change unlocks traps and facilitates identity innovation away from exclusivist identities. This leaves open for substantive dialogue and debate (which may itself stimulate further identity innovation) how better arrangements may be devised.

To take identity innovation (away from divisive and closed identities) as one normative parameter for debate is to break with identity politics. It is to take as an axiom that the identity status quo cannot, and in cases of conflict should not, continue.<sup>24</sup> It does not presume that all change is good, nor does it presume that change towards openness on one dimension is good if it leads to closure on another. But it has the benefit of leaving to individuals in the conflict region to find the optimal mode of innovation from their particular situation. It does not impose one route for example universalization within the existing state, nor does it preclude an emphasis on national or religious particularity, but it invites the actors to argue for institutional change that would help open their own perspectives to more dialogue, without constraining the equal potential of others.

This very simple parameter of debate confirms the general intuitions that border change is justified in colonial situations. Colonial situations – even after the worst colonial exploitation has ended - tend to produce high levels of cultural inequality in which universalistic arguments are monopolized by the ‘colonists’ who use them to assert their superior status and rights. This leaves the ‘natives’ with little potential of asserting their equal status with the colonists or offering an egalitarian mode of cultural coexistence. In such circumstances there are very strong arguments that secession (from the imperial realm) may be the only way to make future equal coexistence possible. The colonists do not have an equal and opposite argument for the status quo. Indeed rather than decolonization precluding them from changing towards coexistence, it may be the best way to incentivize such change. There are other non- colonial cases where there are compelling non-nationalist reasons for trans-border institutions

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<sup>23</sup> Brubaker, 1996; Beissinger, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> As always there is an 'other things equal' caveat. Thus this should not be taken to delegitimize the appeal to group identity as one of the few available resources in the struggle against inequality, although as discussed above this appeal is often framed in innovatory (pluralist, universalist) forms.

or even border change, in order to provide an open and equal arena for further change through dialogue.<sup>25</sup> Conversely, it is highly unlikely that these parameters would provide strong arguments for minority irredentist nationalisms in Eastern Europe (see Baubock, 2010).

There are also cases where the lack of options for one party in the existing situation is matched by a lack of options for the other in any likely alternative but in the examples given in the literature, these traps are eminently political.<sup>26</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Everyday identity innovation plays a weak emancipatory role. It is weak because it has no force against violence, power and marginalisation, but it remains the only way that power change can become transformational. In benign circumstances, identity innovation can be undertaken in a multiplicity of ways, with a thousand different routes to get to better and more permeable relationships. But not every mode of change is sustainable from every social position. In societies with composite embedded divisions, individual innovation has to be radical, transformative, if it is to survive. Often individuals who change have to bide their time, find niches where they can sustain alternative perspectives, until real prospects of wider social change emerge.

This has immediate policy implications for conflict situations. Often it is argued that identity change – in the sense of change of ethnic or national identity categories – is rare and not to be anticipated. Even if this is true, identity change in the sense of change in the meaning, permeability and salience of the received categories is highly likely, including in conflict situations. Part of what state and international policy initiatives can do is to remove the traps that tend to reverse innovation and to marginalise the individuals who innovate, creating more social niches where innovation can be sustained and grow in safety.

Even more, policy makers should reject their own common sense assumptions that their cosmopolitan or multi-culturalist perspectives can be imposed upon locals. This is not to posit a cultural relativism that uncritically accepts (oppositional) local ethnic identities. Rather it is to argue that not all national and cultural arguments are equal: some do and some don't express genuine and widely acceptable aims and values of autonomous development and mutual respect; some do and some don't point the way towards reciprocal innovation. Policy should work with the grain of everyday change, introducing new repertoires and institutional resources for those working for change.

I have set out some common types of innovation, and the predictable obstacles that they meet. Where social transformation happens, it is a conjuncture of processes of different temporality: niches of individuals who have changed, with ripple and exemplary effects; structural opportunities for wider social change; delegitimation of old ideologies and leaders, so that new

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<sup>25</sup> For Northern Ireland, see Ruane and Todd 1996, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> What Abulof (2015) calls 'small peoples' open to such ontological insecurity become so, on his own account, when there is no evident way for them to transmute, adapt, fuse or split while maintaining continuity in and through identity innovation: Afrikaners for whom a path became available innovated, Israelis for whom paths appeared closed did not.

projects can take root. If this culminates in a cascade of change, it is made possible by slower incremental processes, including processes of individual identity innovation.

To emphasise identity innovation is to highlight the weak emancipatory power of individuals-in-interdependence, the potential to use one's given heritage – national, religious, class – to progressive purposes by reinterpreting it, finding its positive potential, clarifying what has to be left behind and why. That is an old aim, implicit in art and literature.<sup>27</sup> Everyday identity innovation has some of that creative and emancipatory potential. That it usually fails does not take away from its value.

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<sup>27</sup> Marxist aesthetics , from Lukacs through Adorno and Benjamin to Marcuse, was a prolonged engagement on how this was to be accomplished. Adorno et al, 2006.

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