4 Decolonization as Transformation
Malek Bennabi's Philosophy of Liberation

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In 1956, the Algerian philosopher and anticolonial thinker-activist Malek Bennabi (1905–1973) published his *Afro-Asianism* in exile in Cairo.[1] In this seminal book, which advances several major concerns of his earlier corpus,[2] Bennabi elaborates on his project of eliminating colonizability and colonialism, the two sides of the predicament of colonized people, and articulates his political and intellectual approach to thinking alternatives beyond the polarizations of the Cold War and against neocolonialism – or what he calls "co-colonization" (Bennabi [1956] 2021: 67). This book also marks his first major theorization of the larger, cross-continental solidarity that would become crucial to his project of liberation. In Bennabi's philosophy, colonialism and colonizability are the dyad with which the world has to be thought and rethought. This is the signature of all his intellectual works, which are marked by the audacity to think otherwise.

Born in colonized Algeria to a poor family, Bennabi was, like many of his contemporaries, of bilingual, bicultural formation since he attended the religious Muslim school and the French colonial school.[3] In 1930, at the age of 25, he traveled to France to continue his education upon the advice of his parents, as life seemed to be impossible in colonial Algeria. Upon his arrival in Paris, he tried to enroll in the Institut des Langues Orientales de Paris but was rejected "because he was an Algerian 'native' rather than

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[1] Bennabi arrived in Cairo to join the National Liberation Army (ALN) (Armée de Libération), but he could not do so and lived as an exile in Cairo till 1963, when he returned to Algeria. Bennabi's stay in Cairo made it possible for him to introduce his work to Arabic readers, and he started to write in Arabic in 1958.

[2] These works include *The Qur'anic Phenomenon* [*Le Phénomène coranique* (1947)], *The Conditions of Renaissance* [*Les Conditions de la renaissance* (1949)], and *Vocation of Islam* [*Vocation de l'islam* (1954)]. The latter is translated by Asma Rashid as *Islam in History and Society*, but throughout this chapter, I will refer to it as *The Vocation of Islam*.

[3] For this aspect of Bennabi's bicultural formation, see Jebari (2020). For comprehensive accounts of Bennabi's life and thought, see Bariun (1993) and Boukrouh (2006).

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a Frenchman" (Christelow 2012: 133). The well-known Algerian historian Abu al-Qasim Sa'adalla described Bennabi's disillusionment:

> During the centenary celebration of the French occupation in 1930, Bennabi left Algeria for France. He left his people and home and migrated, believing that France was the land of the revolution of 1789, as Farhat Abbas and his like did believe. It turned out that all of these were mere stories in the imaginative schoolbooks, while, in reality, Bennabi was treated as a native [*ahli*] from the Algerian colony. (Sa'adalla 1988a: 215)[4]

He enrolled in a polytechnic school and graduated as an engineer in 1935. This technical education had a tremendous impact on the thought and language of Bennabi, who often used mathematical terms and encapsulated his ideas and arguments into simple equations. His writings are marked by his scientific and bicultural formation, by the impact of French colonialism and imperialism, and by his scrupulous attention to the internal problems that structured the condition of colonized peoples. Thinking from within what the Egyptian Marxist political and social theorist Anouar Abdel-Malek calls a "civilizational project" (1977), Bennabi understood decolonization in terms of transformation, as a project that lays the foundation for a new edification, for a better civilization, a better future. Thus, the present chapter engages with Bennabi's philosophy of liberation and theory of decolonization as a transformative project. It attempts to lay out some of the major aspects of this project, with a focus on how he conceived the problem of colonialism/colonizability and on the answers he offered for overcoming it.

Anticolonial Thought beyond the Imperial and Colonial Episteme

Anticolonial thought was not only concerned with the political but also entailed social thought that generated ideas, concepts, and theories about the self, society, and social relations: "While sociology and social theory was institutionalized in the metropole to reflect the imperial episteme, anticolonial thought offered views of society from the ground up, in the dark underside of empire" (Go 2023: 3). Engaging with this aspect of anticolonial thought involves a continuous effort to move beyond the imperial and colonial episteme and think with traditions that were often neglected as potential sources for thinking about concepts such as the

[4] All translations from Arabic are mine. When English translations of Bennabi's writings are quoted, I compare the translated texts with the French and Arabic texts and modify the translation when necessary. I would like to thank Zakariae Bouhmala for his help with the French texts.

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human, society, history, and culture. This shift, which could be understood as moving beyond the pretentious self-sufficiency of Euro-American theories of what constitutes the social,[5] necessitates moving beyond the notion that anticolonial thought is only something formulated against colonial powers. It requires openness to the thought protocols of anticolonial thinkers themselves, looking into the set of problems and questions they addressed and what that implies for their larger project of liberation and reconstruction.

Bennabi, who as an Arab and Muslim born in colonial Algeria witnessed various forms of racism, the atrocities of colonialism, and the disintegration of his society, and who critiqued the Janus-faced bind of colonialism/colonizability, is in my reading occupied primarily with the (re)constructive aspect of transforming the social conditions of his context. He is concerned with the problems he deemed central within his immediate environment, and this does not easily fit within the paradigm of canonical academic postcolonialism, which, beyond the important question of how colonial power relations inform knowledge production,[6] neglects two important senses in which the location of intellection and anticolonial critique matter: first, each location has its own set of problems and questions that require attending to, theoretically and practically, and second, each critique and project of liberation, because it is addressed to a certain audience, is constituted by a certain language, memory, and "discursive tradition" shared with its audience.

This means that more attention should be paid to the relation between anticolonial thought, its location and language, and the "lingual memory" within which it operates. I borrow the term "lingual memory" from the US linguist Alton Becker, who uses it to refer to the repertoire of *prior texts* – I would also add orature – and to "words and silences that shape a context, in space, in time, in social relations, in nature, and in emotions and subtle intimations" (Becker 1995: 12). I expand this concept to include the repertoire of knowledge, histories, stories, problems, questions, and answers that are invoked, addressed, and largely shape or even structure the anticolonial argument. This lingual – in fact, oral – memory, seen here as the canvas of the argument, is, in short, what makes the language of critique familiar to its audience. This lingual oral

[5] For more literature on putting empire, colonialism, and Eurocentrism at the center of thinking of social theory, see Alatas and Sinha (2017), Al-Hardan (2022; in this volume), and Go (2013; 2016; 2023).

[6] For example, the Euro-American academy largely neglects the constructive aspect of anticolonial thought while focusing more on the legitimate critique of Eurocentrism, which is no doubt an urgent task in that location. However, this often marginalizes central reconstructive elements of anticolonial thought; see also Gandhi (2018: xiv).

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memory, which in the case of Bennabi's critique operates from within Islam, is a concept that helps one appreciate his thought, which places the predicaments of his time within larger (connected) histories that go beyond colonialism as a historical experience.

The Janus-Faced Bind of Colonialism and Colonizability

As early as 1949, in *The Conditions of the Renaissance* [*Les conditions de la renaissance*], Bennabi historically located the moment when Europe embraced the colonial culture of the Roman Empire, which turned all those who did not belong to the Roman Empire into barbarians: "Since the discovery of America, which marks its inauguration, the contemporary [European] civilisation has resorted to honour the entire Roman tradition, so strongly marked with the colonial notion" (Bennabi [1949] 2000a: 308). He critiques Europe's false humanism by describing it as "a centripetal humanism: in this case, it signifies 'Europeanism' within and 'colonialism' without – the latter based on the most scandalous and most odious political equation according to which a *man* multiplied by *coloniser co-efficient* is equal to an *indigene*" (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 3). Colonialism is the outer face of Europeanism, an ideology that produces, outside Europe, hierarchies of superior (the European) and inferior, which he calls the "prototype of the colonised being: the indigene," the native, the non-European (Bennabi [1949] 2000a: 309). The indigene is a racial category that locks up the colonized in relation to the colonial equation.[7] To rewrite Bennabi's formula: in the colonial racist equation, multiplication by the colonialist coefficient stigmatizes the colonized people as a different, inferior species. It is this context that made Bennabi blisteringly critique the Algerian elite who accepted their "name of *baptism*: the indigene": "one has not seen a eunuch call themselves a 'eunuch,' but one has seen the Algerian intellectuals calling themselves, at every possible opportunity, indigene" (Bennabi [1949] 2000a: 309). The word "eunuch" signifies deficiency and unproductivity; by adopting "indigene," the Algerian elite was accepting the inferior position assigned to the colonized intellectual within the colonial order and the hierarchy of values established by the colonial power.

[7] One should note here that Bennabi considers the label indigenous to be a derogatory term that is part of the production of colonial signifiers. Paulin J. Hountondji, a Beninese philosopher, also rejects the term indigenous, as it always has a derogatory connotation (1997). One, however, should look at the uses of the term in its context. Many indigenous people throughout the world have claimed the term to fight settler-colonialism and affirm their right to their land.

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The use of the word baptism further denotes the link between Christianizing and colonizing missions as assimilatory machines that integrate and subalternize the colonized into the schemes of the Euro-colonial systems. In tracing the genealogy of this colonial enterprise, Bennabi argues that while European society was originally oriented to its soil, to the interior, "Christianism and Cartesianism came to complete the physiognomy of this society, profoundly, perhaps excessively, penetrated with the sense of utility. The former brought to it the sense of the universal, and through it the dynamism that its static temperament lacked; the latter tailored its fundamental activities for efficiently integrating them in the industrial vitality that was going to surge from its revolution […] Christianism also deposited the ferment of moral expansion that would serve as justification for the crusades and the colonial enterprise" (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 16). The crusades, followed by the conquest of the Americas, generated a "*profound rupture between a dominating Europe and the rest of humanity*," a rupture that has informed European world politics since then (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 16, emphasis added). This rupture is predicated on the myth of the superior race of masters, a myth that saturated European cultural, academic, philosophical, and scientific productions, and even European society as a whole (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 69).

This critique of colonialism is also a critique of nationalism and racism. Bennabi argues that colonialism engenders "hypernationalism," which ultimately engenders the myth of the "chosen race": "founded on racial contempt, colonialism engenders a super-racism" (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 69). This critique comes close to that of the Martinican Marxist politician and anticolonial thinker Aimé Césaire, whom Bennabi cites at length to criticize European civilization as a violent power that decivilizes and degrades the human.

Bennabi further differentiates between two kinds of colonialism: liberal and totalitarian. While the former gives – at least in appearance – a free hand to the colonized, the latter "intervenes directly in all the domains of the life of the colonised, penetrating into even the details of their religious life" ([1954] 1999: 55). Colonialism does not naturally "promote" the colonized but instead paralyzes them, just like the spider paralyzes the victim caught in its net (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 48). Bennabi terms these colonialist procedures, which intervene in the social life of the colonized in order to ultimately control and subjugate them, as "the coloniser coefficient."

Colonialism, which follows the maxim "divide and rule," disrupts the social institutions of the colonized people and intervenes in all possible ways to sabotage the transformation of their conditions. Bennabi thus

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calls for vigilance: "colonialism makes use of whatever means – economic, political, cultural, and psychological – so as to create a social vacuum in our life" (Bennabi 2002: 107). It directs its policy to destroy the network of social relations and renders society incapable of undertaking collective, concerted action to make its own history.

This critique of colonialism demonstrates and maps out the actualizations of colonial procedures, which penetrate all domains. Colonial technologies, which continually disturb the social web and the ordinary acts of life, are always kept unnoticed – *concealed* from the colonized, as if "an invisible hand constantly disturbs the milestones showing them the way, always pushing back the signposts that mark the goal towards which they keep on marching indefinitely. It is a task of Danaids that gobbles up all their efforts, in vain" (Bennabi [1949] 2000a: 306). In this extreme form of colonialism, what remains possible within the colonial situation is only what the colonial administration leaves open to the colonized.

In *Afro-Asianism*, Bennabi puts forward a blistering critique of colonial and imperial powers. Animated by the racial/colonial enterprise, Bennabi maintains that the so-called civilized world is divided by a mechanism that is dominated by "a centripetal morality and a centrifugal technology" ([1956] 2021: 47). Industrially advanced Europe is ethically regressed, and the grammar of the European power complex is predicated on "racism and contempt for the human" (Bennabi [1956] 2021: 47). In terms of technology, Europe lives in the twentieth century, but in terms of the "will to power" embedded in its unconscious, Europe is still living in the nineteenth century or even in the Middle Ages, spiritually nurtured by the "chronicle of the Holy Inquisitions" and "the actions of the Conquistadores" (Bennabi [1956] 2021: 47).

Thus, European technological advancement should not be interpreted as an indication of the superiority of their mode of being human or their moral values. Bennabi critiques this interpretative tendency that appears in the thesis of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Race and History* (1952), a book published under the aegis of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Bennabi specifically targeted Lévi-Strauss' argument that the technical preeminence of Europe is based on the preeminence of its moral values. To Bennabi, such absolute judgments emanate from the parochiality of Europeans, who are so imprisoned in their cultural system that they find it difficult to escape the illusory attribution of material success to moral virtue ([1956] 2021: 54). While Bennabi does not deny the moral values of "Europe," he stresses that they are interior virtues, centripetal, without radiation. And he states that "[t]he 'Western' mind […] does not realize this

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particular disposition because it is, itself, *interior* and *morally centripetal*" (Bennabi [1956] 2021: 54, emphasis in the original). European virtues are, therefore, ineffective in directing the world, as they lack radiation toward the world of others. Europeans do not take their virtues outside their world, and outside their borders they are no longer "the human" but "the European," who no longer sees humans but instead "natives" (Bennabi [1956] 2021: 54). Colonial powers see nothing "sacred" in the colonized people, neither their blood nor their honor nor their basic rights (Bennabi [1956] 2021: 50). Outside Europe, Bennabi maintains, Europeans reconstitute a "colonial situation" in which the form of relation is that of exploitation and domination.[8]

In *Afro-Asianism*, Bennabi is more explicit about the racializing grammar of Europe and its "will to power," which is embedded in its psychology as a "'power' complex – imperialism, colonialism, racism" (Bennabi [1956] 2021: 330). He refers to three events from his time as epitomes of racism and apartheid: the brutal lynching of Emmett Till, an African American, in Mississippi; the shutting down of Forte Hare, the only college for "colored" people by the apartheid regime of South Africa; and the expulsion of Miss Autherine Lucy Foster, the first Black student admitted to the University of Alabama, by a "white" mob (Bennabi [1956] 2021: 65). Bennabi sees these events as attempts to secure "*white supremacy*" (Bennabi [1956] 2021: 50, emphasis in the original). Bennabi thus thinks of colonialism as a form of relation in which the colonizer objectifies the colonized and the non-white, racializing them as inferior. Like Césaire and Frantz Fanon, Bennabi highlights colonialism's overarching effects on the colonized and the colonizer: "colonialism that materially kills the colonised, also destroys morally the coloniser" (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 63). His critique of European civilization and its humanism aims at steering the colonized away from the European model that made the "return to the troglodyte age" possible (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 71).

By demonstrating that the European model is one to avoid and not to imitate, Bennabi implicitly criticizes the Arab modernist movement's

[8] Here Bennabi uses the phrase "colonial situation" in quotation marks, but it is not clear if he borrowed it from Georges Balandier, who had already reviewed *Vocation de l'Islam* (Balandier 1955), or from Octave Mannoni's *Psychologie de la colonisation* (1950), which Bennabi later reviewed in one of his articles (see below). Frantz Fanon also uses the phrase without mentioning Balandier, though he devoted a chapter in *Peau noire, masques blancs* to criticizing Mannoni's thesis (see Steinmetz 2021). It is interesting to note that Balandier attributes this phrase neither to himself nor to Mannoni but to the American sociologist Louis Wirth. Balandier writes: "This writer [Mannoni] is not, however, the creator of this expression, which is found with different meanings in previous works, notably in the studies devoted to the typology of minorities by the American sociologist L. Wirth" (Balandier and Cunneen 1952: n. 2).

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approach of catching up with and blindly borrowing from Europe. Yet even as he critiques the obsession with Europe, he does not call for delinking from Europe, but rather for readjusting the relation with it. He actually calls for a new civilization, which, according to him, is not that "of an arrogant continent or that of selfish people, but of a humanity putting in common all its potentialities" (Bennabi [1949] 2000a: 308).

Colonizability/Colonisabilité

Bennabi's concern was not only to put the blame on colonialism's racism, brutality, avarice, or deceit, but also to locate the sources of weakness in Algeria and the Muslim worlds. He locates these sources in the society that makes the "milieu colonisable," and the sum total of these sources constitutes "colonizability" [*colonisabilité*]: a concept that he coined and that almost overshadowed his intellectual career. It first appeared in *The Conditions of Renaissance* [*Les conditions de la renaissance*] ([1949] 2005) under the heading "the auto-reducing factor," and it then recurred in his writings as a concept that sits beside colonialism and imperialism.

Bennabi's third seminal book, *The Vocation of Islam* (1954), coincided with the launch of yet another war of national liberation in Algeria. In the national fight against the unspeakable French atrocities, Bennabi's focus on colonizability was largely seen as untimely. It had been taken, especially in certain anticolonialist, nationalist circles and the FLN, as a concept that undermined national claims and national unity against colonialism. The concept, which was seen as a cause of weakening patriotic and nationalist feeling and a threat to the anticolonial nationalist struggle for liberation, was therefore vehemently opposed. By abandoning the anticolonial language of victimhood, Bennabi was seen as putting the blame on the victims of colonialism, who are now doubly marked as colonizable and colonized.[9]

Certain nationalist voices in Algeria thus utterly rejected Bennabi's concept of colonizability and lumped it with the colonialist agenda of justifying colonialism and its atrocities. Though the concept was criticized, the failure to directly associate Bennabi's name with it is remarkable. Mostefa Lacheraf,[10] speaking of the racist discourse of the "new

[9] However, Bennabi's concept gained currency in the Arab East during his stay in Cairo. In fact, he was introduced to the Arabic public through the well-known Egyptian writer Ihsan Abdel Quddous (1919–1990); see Al-Haras (1993).

[10] Mostefa Lacheraf (1917–2007) was an Algerian writer, sociologist, historian, and politician who joined the FLN after the Algerian Revolution began in 1954. He worked as editor-in-chief of the FLN's journal, El Moudjahid, for a brief period after independence in 1962.

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Latin race" perpetuated by the colonial settlers in Algeria, argues that French historians and men of culture cannot ignore or deny the existence of the Algerian nation. He points out, however, that the prejudices of these colonialists, historians, and men of culture could be excused given that some Algerians buttress colonial theories by speaking about colonizability, which he understood as "a sort of collective, historical, inescapable predisposition that leads you to enslavement under the harsh redemptive law of the foreigner!" (Lacheraf 1965: 15). Lacheraf even deems it as reminiscent of "the defeatist 'mea culpa', an invalid argument that the Vichy French government made to justify its subjugation to Nazism" (1965: 15). In his book *Frantz Fanun wa al-thawra al-jazaʾriyya* [*Frantz Fanon and the Algerian Revolution*], Mohamed El Mili, an FLN member and Fanon's colleague as the editor of *El Moudjahid*'s Arabic section, echoed Lacheraf's criticism when he deemed colonizability as racist and colonial in its origin and a justification for colonialism, and made it congruent with "colonial determinism" and the idea that there are positive effects of colonialism – an idea deployed "to justify [colonialism's] resistance to liberation movements and its oppression of people striving to gain independence" (El Mili 2007: 44).[11]

However, Bennabi was careful not to reduce social and political problems to psychological ones, even though he saw them as interconnected. While Fanon and the Tunisian-French writer and sociologist Albert Memmi understood his concept as only a psychological complex, Bennabi posited colonizability as a sociopsychological condition saturating the modes of existence of the colonized.[12] In an article titled "Saikulujiyyat al-istiʾmar" [The Psychology of Colonialism], Bennabi provides a critical account of the French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* ([1950] 1998]. He argues that there are no connections between Mannoni's

[11] In the same vein, Fanon considers studies that speak of "the complex of colonizability" to be colonist maneuvers that attempt to defuse the colonized's hatred of colonialism (Fanon 2004: 89–90). Memmi similarly lumped together the concepts "dependency complex" and "colonizability" and saw them in their psychological aspects (Memmi 2003:132). There is a somehow similar critique of this concept that has been recently reproduced; see Gana (2023: 29–30).

[12] In his autobiographical novel *Awraq* (1989), Abdalla Laroui, a Moroccan Marxist historian and thinker, states that as the publication of Bennabi's book coincided with the Algerian revolution, the colonial authorities exploited the book for their advantage as they did with Driss Chraïbi's book *The Simple Past*. Laroui's first narrator caricatures Bennabi's concept, colonizability, while the main character, Idriss, also mocks it, using a language of victimization: "as if the one responsible for theft is not the thief but the owner of the house" (128). Then Idriss offers a kind of review of the book (Laroui 2004: 128–132).

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argument for the "dependence complex" of the native and his own notion of "colonizability." After probing the relationship of ownership that Mannoni analytically establishes between the native and the European, Bennabi argues that Mannoni thinks of the colonized society as still coherent but static and dependent precisely because of its natural or innate psychological dependency, and that he, on the contrary, deals with a social condition in which society is disintegrated altogether as a result of social impediment (Bennabi 1981: 21–22). Bennabi points out that while Mannoni's colonized society establishes with colonialism a psychosocial connection, thereby giving priority to the psychological, he speaks of a society that establishes a sociopsychological link, thereby prioritizing the social. Bennabi describes a stagnant society that has lost the dynamicity of its web of social relations and finds itself in a state of structural weakness, thus becoming colonizable.

While Bennabi, like Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, diagnoses a stagnant social condition within the context of colonialism, he departs from Fanon on the question of the cause of this condition. Fanon attributes it to structural colonial conditions, while Bennabi takes para-colonial and precolonial histories into account and suggests that colonizability names a condition that can be traced to the decline of Arabic-Islamic civilization in al-Andalus (Andalusia) in the Iberian peninsula and North Africa.[13] It is the colonizable mode of existence, inherited without transformation, that sustains itself even in Bennabi's time, and so he speaks of the "Post-Almohadian man" and "Post-Almohad society." While Bennabi's work largely understands colonizability as a precondition of colonialism, some readings of Bennabi see colonizability as a succeeding rather than a preceding cause of colonialism (Shawish 2007). I contend that this understanding of the temporality of colonizability, which is broadly underpinned by a problematic linear temporality of modernity, is mistaken. If colonizability habitually endures as a condition saturating the modes of existence of the colonized, then it is intergenerational in nature and thus belongs to multiple uneven temporalities – the sociopsychological infrastructures of the colonizable modes of existence come from different historical worlds and different historical generations. This unevenness of temporality, the simultaneity of different times, is what marks any mode of existence in which history and society are articulated and embodied.

[13] The Almohad rule (1120–1269) of Berber dynasties took over from the Almoravid dynasty (1040–1147). The decline of Almohad rule, according to Bennabi, marked the decline of the entire Muslim civilization. This decline engendered a post-Almohad man (or post-civilizational man) and a post-Almohad society whose mode of existence has affinities with Bennabi's time.

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The problem with (colonizable) modes of existence is that they are embodied without alteration, without introspection or creative refashioning. Colonizable modes of existence are thus critiqued because they embody a time of repetition without creativity and efficacy; but there is always a possibility of rupture, discontinuity, and amelioration where colonizability turns into non-colonizability through, among many other things, the transformation of the self and the use of the available means with the "over-effort" that is required.[14]

While the crushing and overarching forces of colonialism "inferioris[e]" the colonized, this "coloniser coefficient" cannot "affect the fundamental value of the individual" (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 47). Thus, if the colonized are inefficient or not exerting arduous over-effort and taking necessary action to decolonize and transform their conditions beyond the dictates of colonialism, then we are dealing with problems for which colonialism cannot be incriminated:

> [C]olonialism acts, at the same time, as a reality when it effectively inhibits action,— and as a myth when it becomes an alibi or a mask for colonizability… Moreover, colonisation is to a certain degree the most fortunate effect of the colonisability because it reverses the social evolution that has engendered the colonisable being […] who becomes conscious of his colonisability once he is colonised and thus finds himself obliged to "de-indigenise" himself and become incolonisable. (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 47–48)

Bennabi's understanding of colonialism as a sociopsychological (and not simply political) structure can be denoted from his distinction between conquered and colonized countries:

> In the former, a pre-existing synthesis of man, soil and time, implies a non-colonisable individual; in the other, the existing social conditions betoken the colonizability of the individual, and foreign occupation inevitably becomes a colonisation. Rome had not colonised but conquered Greece. England, while it had colonised 400 million Hindus, could not colonise Ireland. On the contrary, Yemen, though never colonised, could not profit from its independence because of its Colonizability (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 48).

Marked with the unevenness of multiple temporalities, colonizability can be understood as a sociopsychological condition that coexists with colonialism but can also exist without it. Colonizability could precede or succeed colonialism, which itself reinforces the colonizable condition, but could also coexist with colonialism in the sociopolitical and psychological realms.

[14] This reading is enabled by Bennabi's thinking about renaissance or rebirth as something underpinned by the possibility of rupture with the status quo.

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Awareness of this colonizable condition is possible only retrospectively and dialectically: it is only through colonialism that one can think of colonizability. Colonizability as a concept bears the signature of Hegelian dialectics in the sense that Bennabi presupposes two equal and independent subjects. If, following Bennabi's account, colonialism – animated by a monstrous sense of Cartesian pure rationality that thingifies and thus negates colonized subjects – demoralizes, dehumanizes, and de-civilizes the colonized people, then it is axiomatic to think that the urgent task is to lay the foundation for a non-colonizable society, to prevent colonialism from actualizing its policies. This task requires mapping out internal weaknesses in need of reconditioning, and it is for this reason that Bennabi theorizes colonizability, a concept whose landscape includes the set of problems that infrastructurally saturate a sociopsychological condition. It can include individualism, atomic thinking and acting, divorce of words and ideas from action, idolization/fetishization (of politics, language, tradition, institutions), imitative thinking and doing, lack of responsibility, lack of mission and orientation, lack of efficacy and creativity, absence of self-criticism, accumulation of ideas and products, economic and intellectual dependency, the despotism of things and persons, and belief in the unique person or thing as a source of salvation, among many other sociopolitical and psychological pathologies that structure the society and make it unable to produce civilization.[15] Colonizability names the social-psychological conditions that are infrastructurally saturated by problems, pathologies, and weaknesses, making it difficult to be decolonized and to ensure the well-being of humans and their environment.

Self-Reliance, Duty-and-Means-Oriented Politics, and the Colonized

Bennabi contends that politics aimed at transforming the condition of colonized people must be based on a scrupulous understanding of their condition. This further entails a rethinking of politics as such, beyond formalism, proceduralism, and the state. After affirming that there is a direct relationship between life and politics, the latter being the planning of the former, Bennabi gives a definition: "[P]olitics *is, in its essence, the enterprise of regulating the successive transformations of the condition of men*. This relationship, which defines the condition of the individual as the end

[15] This concept bears commonalities with Syed Hussein Alatas' approach and especially his concept of the captive mind; see Alatas (1972; 1974), F. Alatas (2007), and Al-Zayed (2022).

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of all politics, also designates the individual as an agent in the pursuit of this end. The human is thus doubly involved in the political enterprise: as subject and as object" (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 48–49, emphasis added).

In contrast to the anticolonial formulations of his time – Fanon and Memmi think dialectics in terms of the colonized and the colonizer[16] – Bennabi argues that the dialectics of object and subject within the colonized geography should be reformulated in terms of the colonized and the colonizable: two facets of the same social condition. This reformulation – which is pitted against the politics prevalent in his time, which spoke only the language of rights (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 49–50)[17] – is significant because it reorients the colonized: what becomes central is action that can change their circumstances and create the means for that change; and such means cannot be demanded from the colonizer.

Bennabi's vision of decolonization starts from below, from the social conditions according to which one can have a sense of the political activity that must be undertaken. This politics, which he calls "applied sociology" and pits against "simple demagogy," presupposes two postulates: (1) "to make the politics of its means" and (2) "to make the means of its politics" (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 50). This correspond to two successive stages that result: (a) to formulate policy attuned to the primordial means available for the colonized and (b) to transform and perfect these means so that they become capable of changing the various conditions of the colonized and their environment.

While these two fundamental principles provide the content of the politics required for transformation, Bennabi is indifferent to the form of such politics, be it "republican, monarchical or even autocratic" (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 50). For him, the content of politics is the only criterion that allows one to distinguish between applied sociology and simple mythology (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 50). This indifference to formal politics and its institutions can be read as prioritizing social change over the political, but it more so reflects his belief that formal politics is often severed from the actual domain of peoples' lives, and is often regulated by the self-interests of parties and politicians who always make shifts according to these interests – therefore it cannot be the criterion of judgment.

This is an understanding of politics that moves beyond the Weberian state-centered model. Bennabi does not permit a monopoly of politics or political sovereignty by the state or its political institutions and

[16] The Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad, like Memmi, thinks through the dialectics of the colonized and the colonizers; see Pérez (in this volume).

[17] Bennabi was very critical of what he called "partyism" and "Boulitique"; see Bennabi ([1954] 1999: 51–53).

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instead affirms the "sovereignty" of political and social actions that can be achieved from below through constructing a triadic synthesis: the human, time, and soil. He thus downplays the role of institutional politics in favor of politics as a transformative enterprise that is capable of changing the sociopsychological infrastructure as well as the mode of existence that constitutes and shapes the nature of political institutions.[18]

The question of means and ends is central to Bennabi's anticolonial thought. For instance, he criticizes the Arab modernist movement because it does not work toward creating its means and thereby transforming the condition of the colonized. It instead tries to get itself out of "its present embarrassment," that is, it wants only political independence – to transfer power to its hands. This indicates a failure to reorient politics to the questions of duty, means, methods, and techniques that ensure the transformation of the material conditions of the colonized. Even earlier, in *The Conditions of Renaissance*, Bennabi responds to the then popular maxim "rights are not given but extorted" by noting that this maxim "forgot that right is neither a gift that is 'given, nor a prey which is seized', but the simple *corollary* of duty and that a people create their charter by modifying its social milieu, bound up with the 'behaviour of its soul'. The sublime law is: transform yourself, and you shall transform your history" (Bennabi [1949] 1997: 645–647, translation modified).[19] The keyword here is *corollary*. In Bennabi's philosophy, the duty-right relation is ontological, thus neither one can be thought of or actualized without the other. Furthermore, it may be noted that Bennabi's means-oriented politics is simultaneously duty-oriented; thus the question of ends and rights is subordinated to the political and moral configurations of the question of means and duty; the ways of dealing with means and enacting duties also configure and define the rights and ends themselves.

In the Algerian context, Bennabi locates the shift from the register of duty to that of right in 1936. This is when Jam'iyat al-'ulama, the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema, joined the delegation of the Algerian Muslim Congress in Paris to demand political rights from

[18] Likewise, in his theorization of Afro-Asian economy, Bennabi reemphasizes his means-oriented policy by pointing to the principle of efficiency in doing the maximum with the given means at the individual as well as the collective level; see Bennabi ([1956] 2021: 196).

[19] This is a translation of the Quranic principle expressed in the following verse: "Verily, God will not change the condition of men, till they change what is in themselves." This was a guiding principle of Jam'iyat al-'ulama in their educational program. The same played a central role in the thought of Muslim philosophers such as the Pakistani Mohammed Iqbal, the Iranian Ali Shariati, and the Moroccan Mohammed Aziz Lahbabi.

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the newly appointed Popular Front government.[20] In his reading, this event seems to mark the abandonment of the tenets of decolonization as a project of transformation, which aimed at the regeneration of the Algerian mode of existence, and the shift to the political game. According to Bennabi, this was made possible through the shift from the idea of *Islah* [reform] to the idol [political game]. It also marked a change of addressee: instead of galvanizing fellow Algerians to fulfill their duties, one calls the colonizers to grant one's rights.

> The miracle was thus operating when it was overtaken by the catastrophic year of 1936. The transformation, the renaissance came to a dead stop and vanished in the political mirage. *One no longer talked of our "duties" but of our "rights." One no longer thought that the problem did not lie essentially in our needs, more or less legitimate, but lay in our habits, our thinking, our acts, our social attitude, our aesthetics and ethics and all those degradations that strike a people who is sleeping.* (Bennabi [1949] 1997: 646, emphasis added)

The sum total of habits, sensibilities, modes of thinking and acting, social attitudes, aesthetics, and ethics form the sociopsychological infrastructure that, arguably, constitutes the modes of existence in a given environment. In Bennabi's project, such modes of existence are the object of change and transformation because they engender social and political institutions. This allows us to understand his insistence on the language of duty and means over that of rights and ends. He seems to suggest that by turning to the colonizer to demand one's rights, one not only implicitly affirms colonial authority as a right-giver but also demands the impossible: colonialism with kindness, as it were. Additionally, one robs oneself of the agency of political action – the capacity to transform that which one controls – by granting it to the colonial administration and thus falling completely under colonial control. This call for self-reliance exemplifies Bennabi's vision of a constructive program that the colonized conduct – with means available to them and under their control – to transform the conditions of their existence.

Decolonization and the Transformative Project of the Social

Bennabi, like many other anticolonial thinkers such as Fanon and Gandhi, understood decolonization as a project of collective action. He argues for building a society with modes of existence, or re-existence, that make it non-colonizable and capable of conducting concerted social

[20] For a historical account of the Algerian Muslim Congress, "Al-m'tamar al-islamy al-Jaza'iry," see Saʿdalla (1988b:149–170).

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action. For him, national liberation does not lead to systemic transformation of the conditions of the colonized.[21] This transformation is realized through constructing a new society that is oriented toward constructing a civilization, which for him is neither given nor a racial/colonial self-image made to differentiate itself from its others, but rather a site of construction and architecture. Bennabi is very cautious in defining his terms. In this context, he defines civilization as "the sum total of the moral and material conditions that allow a society to accord to each of its individuals, in each phase of its existence, from infancy to old age, the assistance necessary for them in the concerned phase of their development" (Bennabi 1992: 58).[22]

For Bennabi, society is a "motor" of liberative transformation. He defines society as "a group that changes its social characteristics through producing the means of change with the awareness of the purpose they are trying to achieve through such change" (Bennabi 2002: 15). Here, the social imperative is not only to change but to produce the means of change in line with the purpose of such change. Three aspects of this society are essential: dynamic movement, the generation of its means, and the function and orientation of this movement (Bennabi 2002: 15–16, 18). For Bennabi, human society, marked by its network of social relations, is irreducible to the individuals that form it, and social transformation is the outcome of harmonious interactive relationships among the three social realms: the realm of persons, the realm of ideas, and the realm of objects. These realms constitute social reality and are inseparable, but they are in need of an additional one that binds them together toward concerted action: the realm of the social relations network. All these realms, given the double condition of colonizability and colonialism, need to be transformed so that decolonization can be realized.

Bennabi thinks in response to a very racist and repressive form of (French) colonialism, which devalues humans and categorizes them as barbarians and nonhumans. If the human is already disfigured by the colonizing mission, then they must be decolonized and transformed. Transformation of the human involves a process of re-existence, through which the human becomes efficient in changing their social condition. For Bennabi, the efficiency of the human being as a factor of civilization is related to a fundamental value and an accidental value. Regarding the former, Bennabi argues that there is a common human value derived

[21] Many anticolonial thinkers, such as Fanon and Amílcar Cabral, cautioned against the conflation between true liberation and formal independence.

[22] When Bennabi publishes all his books with the heading, "mushkilat al-hadadra" [The Problems of Civilization], he thinks of civilization as the prime and guiding question. For a comprehensive study of Bennabi's theory of civilization, see Benlahcene (2011).

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from one's "biological inheritance." He calls the human being's "aptitude to make use of their genius, their soil and their time" the three "permanent riches" ([1949] 2001: 305). These three riches, coupled with one's will "to become," are all at one's disposal, even under the harshest circumstances.

Colonialism intervenes in the accidental social value of the human being, which "essentially consists in the method and the possibility that he borrows or must borrow from the social surroundings for developing his personality; that is to say, his fundamental value. There lies precisely the role of the social institution of the public order" ([1949] 2001: 305). Thus, the objective of colonialism is to de-civilize the colonized and keep them weak, ineffective, and dependent, that is, colonizable. Nonetheless, Bennabi affirms, the colonizer has no control over the fundamental value of human beings. However deplorable colonialism is, people of the colonized country can make use of their genius, time, and resources. This thinking of human value as fundamentally and equally possessed by all human beings is axiomatic and functions as the starting point for social and political action.[23]

Bennabi speaks of the human as "the motor of social life" (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 82), and thus of persons as tied to the social: "*the 'person' as such is not simply an individual who makes up the species, but they are rather a complex being that produces civilization. This being is 'itself' a product of civilization because it is indebted to it for the ideas and objects at its disposal*" (Bennabi 2002: 31).[24] Persons shape the social life by which they are themselves shaped. While persons are shaped by social institutions, these institutions, in my reading of Bennabi, should not be fetishized, for they do not live a life of their own, independent of the humans who produced them. For him, transformation starts with humans because they connect the different social realms and because they are capable of changing these realms: "The human being is involved in the social life as a psycho-temporal factor. They act not only in terms of their temporality, of their material needs, but also in terms of their psychism, of their spirituality" (Bennabi [1954] 1999: 82, translation modified). Thus the human being is at once spiritual and temporal, a constituted and constituting agent, a relational and mediated being. Like other anticolonial thinkers, Bennabi sees individualism as a pathology that leads to a social tragedy in which concerted actions become almost impossible.

[23] Elsewhere Bennabi articulates this fundamental value as "incommensurable vale" accorded by God (1993: 155–156).

[24] Bennabi was writing at a time when the personalism movement was active and its journal *Esprit* was widely read, attracting the attention of many anticolonial thinkers, such as Fanon, Lacheraf, and Lahbabi.

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Bennabi is concerned with the translation of ideas into action, with ideas' efficacy in transforming the condition of the geography of the humans he addresses. Every idea or concept bears in its texture the sociopolitical and cultural universe within which it emerges or operates. The cultural universe "has a dynamic structure the successive aspects of which correspond to variable relations between its structured elements, namely objects, persons and ideas" (Bennabi 2003b: 54). Bennabi tries to highlight that ideas must correspond to a cultural universe in which they can be meaningful and effective in stimulating people into action. This means that ideas cannot be subtracted from the social milieu. It also foregrounds questions of memory and language, since these are the carriers of ideas.

Colonialism's manifestation in bilingualism divides the colonized society into two, with two languages and two memories. Bennabi argues that in colonial times, bilingualism, a consequence of colonialism's enforcement of its language, divided Algerian elites into two different groups. One spoke Arabic and the other French. While the former worked under the banner of reform, the latter worked under that of modernity. This resulted in the division of Algerian society into "two super-imposed 'societies': one representing the traditional and historical aspect of the country and the other wishing to start making its history from the zero-point" (Bennabi 2003b: 96). While the former is a "stiff society that imposes its customs, prejudices and superstitions as being authentic traditions," the latter "is a self-styled revolutionary society, which in fact does not rebel against the false but rather against the most authentic values" (Bennabi 2003b: 98). This has resulted in a chaotic situation in which an idea does not have efficacy in stimulating action, though for different reasons: "On the one side, there is the idea that has lost its social radiation. On the other, there is the idea that has rather a deadly radiation. On the one side, there is inertia and stagnation; on the other, there is pseudo-dynamics and screaming anarchy" (Bennabi 2003b: 98). Bilingualism, in this case, led to the disintegration and division of society and the alienation of a large segment of society from its cultural universe, thereby making concerted action almost impossible.

The realm of objects, for Bennabi, "refers to whatever material things (both natural or man-made) are used or may be used by the human beings to sustain their life" (El-Mesawi 2006: 234). It is always in direct contact with human beings and provides the necessary materials for social transformation and historical change. Within one's location, this realm of objects is not significant by itself, for it can be borrowed from elsewhere; its significance rather lies in its relations with the realms of persons and ideas. Richness in the realm of objects does not

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automatically contribute to transformation unless it enters a meaningful relationship constituted by the realms of persons and ideas. This relationship either contributes to harmony and equilibrium with all social elements or leads to catastrophic ends. The ecological crisis is nothing but the result of this disharmony and the despotism of one realm, that of the humans, over the others.

Like the Indian sociologist Radhakamal Mukerjee (see Silver in this volume), Bennabi does not take the modern nature–culture divide for granted but thinks of the ecological as an elementary aspect of the social. When Bennabi speaks of "the soil" as an element in the civilizational equation, he speaks of it literally as well as metaphorically. The soil is a sign for material things, and it is also the organic link to human life: "the soil is on a par with the inhabitants – when the latter are decadent, the same is true of the former" (Bennabi [1949] 2000a: 466). Bennabi posits that the process of desertification that swallowed the fertile land in North Africa was a sign of the "meteorological problem" that changed habitable lands into dead lands. This environmental crisis "touches the very existence of the human" and "poses the most serious social problem – that of the most elementary condition of animal life for beasts and men" (Bennabi [1949] 2000a: 467). This crisis reflects a dysfunctional relationship between the realm of objects and the realms of persons and ideas. The realms of objects and ideas cannot gain social value unless they are connected to a "superior concern" (Bennabi 2003a: 32), which should sociologically frame the problem found in the realm of objects. For example, Bennabi demonstrates that because a response to the problem of desertification needs a transregional solution, and because a scientific solution is not possible under colonialism, the tree comes to be seen within a larger social problem and thereby gains a very significant social and cultural value.

At the core of Bennabi's theory of social relations is his relentless and primary concern with concerted social action, which is impossible to conduct when society is disintegrated. For Bennabi, all causes of the disintegration of society lie in the social relations network. He points out that before complete disintegration, social pathologies appear as frictions in social relations, making any collective action increasingly impossible. For example, he deems individualism a social pathology because it unsettles the social relations network and inhibits concerted social action. "Thus, a society might appear well-off and growing although its relations network is suffering from many diseases. These social ailments which manifest themselves at the level of inter-personal relationships are most significantly manifested in a feeling of conceit and self-gratification in favour of sheer individualism. As a result, the

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person disappears or, more specifically, the individual gains back independence and power in the body of the society" (Bennabi 2002: 84). Egoistic individuals bring into suspension the person whose traits are linked to the society whose bonds flourish through altruistic persons and relations, guided by the wisdom: "One for all and all for one" (Bennabi 2002: 136). Decolonization involves transforming the network of social relations; this is the first historical task of any society that aspires to generate a new social reality. For Bennabi, the ideal type of society is democratic and altruistic, capable of conducting concerted social action. It is a society in which there is no form of despotism or slavery of any kind, a society that assures the well-being of its members.

In the social thought of Bennabi, the ideal archetype is derived from the realm of ideas, which are applied by the realm of persons, with the means of the realm of objects, to achieve specific objectives. Thus, social reality is an outcome of a multidimensional relational process: "Since the unity of historical [concreted] action is necessary, so too is the conformity between this unity and its finality as manifested in the form of a civilization" (Bennabi 2002: 27). This understanding necessitates the existence of the fourth social category that makes this unity possible: the social relations network. There is no room in Bennabi's scheme for "spontaneous assemblage" between the three realms of the social: "synthesization of these social realms" is a process that "will actualize, both in scope and direction, the transformation of the aspects of life or, more correctly, the evolution of human society" (Bennabi 2002: 27–28). Thus, the measure of a society lies in the status and the texture of its network of social relations: when the texture of the relations is loosened, this is an indication that society is in a pathological state resulting from the inability to conduct effective concerted action, and when the texture is completely undone, the society no longer exists.

Bennabi highlights that in the modern form of societies, such integration and harmony become possible only through the "formal, nonpersonal relations network moving towards as much perfection and extension as possible" (Bennabi 2002: 45). Thus, "social security institutions" replace the social relations network in order to guarantee the flourishing of its members. In Bennabi's theorization of the network of social relations, attention is directed to transforming the modes of existence, which is a precondition of any other transformation – be it social, economic, or political. New modes of existence are what define and shape the new social reality. That is why he is not interested in the mechanical borrowings of modern social and political institutions from elsewhere and why he instead theorizes a new kind of network of social relations that creatively gives rise to new social and political forms.

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Conclusion: Toward Decoloniality/Decolonizability

At the beginning of this chapter, I invoked Bennabi's seminal book *Afro-Asianism* to foreground the transnational political struggle necessary for combating empire and its will to dominate.[25] This book demonstrates the significance of regional and transregional anticolonial solidarities and struggles by showing that they are entangled and complementary processes that can better address the systems of exploitation and domination imposed by empire and colonialism. By conceiving the colonial situation as the result of configurations of colonialism and colonizability – two dimensions of the same sociopolitical condition – Bennabi attempts to move beyond the rhetoric of victimhood and to attend to the para-colonial and precolonial histories that coexist and sit alongside and precede colonialism. He does this in order to scrutinize the continuities and discontinuities of the sociopolitical problems at play in his historical conjuncture, which were surely exacerbated and intensified by colonialism. His project thus enacts a "double critique" with a double task (Khatibi 2019): to direct critique to the self, the internal conditions of the sociopolitical pathologies within the colonized space that made the colonized colonizable in the first place; to direct critique to the external factors, that is, against empire and colonialism.

Bennabi moved, contra his critics, beyond impeding antagonism and what Edward Said would later call rhetoric and "*politics of blame*" (Said 1986: 45) to construct a project of edification that is capable of transforming the colonized society politically, socially, economically, and even spiritually. Bennabi's decolonization is primarily a project of liberation that aims to transform the structural – material, psychological, cultural, sociopolitical – conditions that made colonization possible and to lay the foundation for a non-colonizable society. Such liberation is predicated on the transformation not merely of the political systems but of their sociopsychological infrastructures. Whereas colonized/colonizable society is marked by disintegration and the absence of concerted action, Bennabi focuses thought on the constituting mode of existence, or the sociopsychological infrastructure in which the social actions of individuals are molded. It is through this realm that social actions can be oriented toward a just society in which individuals flourish and antidemocratic tendencies, in the form of slavery and despotism, are avoided.

If the decolonial school, demonstrating that coloniality is the underside of modernity, lays bare the imperial/colonial durability in

[25] He later wrote a complementary book, *Fikrat kumonwilth Islamy* [The Idea of Islamic Commonwealth] ([1958] 2000b).

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the name of progress, modernization, secularism, and universalism (Mignolo and Walsh 2018), then it is equally necessary to interrogate the durability of colonizability and its complicity with coloniality. A radical recalibration of our imperial and colonial structures thus requires not only dismantling external systems of colonial domination but also confronting the internal forms of complicity and entanglement that sustain or reproduce the enduring logics of coloniality.

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