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# The role of public and private sectors in disaster capitalism: an international overview

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# The role of public and private sectors in disaster capitalism: An international overview




Vicente Sandoval
Darien Williams
Wes Cheek
Jason von Meding
Ksenia Chmutina
Claudia Gonzáles-Muzzio
Giussepe Forino
Isabella Tomassi
Victor Marchezini
Mittul Vahanvati
Holmes Páez
Michael Boyland

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For additional information, please contact:

United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR)
9-11 Rue de Varembé, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland, Tel: +41 22 917 89 08

## Summary

At the outset, this study affirms that disasters provide opportunities: for some, this can mean positive societal change; for others, it is the ideal time for profit, resource extraction, and reinforcing the business-as-usual *status quo*. The latter has in recent years become known as 'disaster capitalism'. This paper demonstrates that disaster capitalism manifests through the interplay between neoliberal reforms, practices, and disasters, and it is prominent in public and private sectors alike. There has been limited exploration of the role and the contribution of the public and private sectors in the (re)production and accumulation of disaster risks from a disaster capitalism optic, both in the academic literature and in the policy realm. This study responds to this gap and provides a preliminary international overview of the root causes, behaviours, and consequences of disaster capitalism, its contribution to disaster risk creation, and its role in the systemic nature of risk. The study analyses diverse *ex-ante* and *ex-post* experiences of disaster capitalism in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, India, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, and the United States, within a timespan that goes from European colonial times until the current Covid-19 pandemic. This is done through secondary data sources and literature review, grounded in a social constructionist approach to disasters. We show that, when disasters are not addressed with strategies for positive social change, the space is occupied by self-interested actors who pose a challenge to all disaster risk reduction and resilience efforts made by citizens, national and local governments, and international organisations. Moreover, interconnected neoliberal reforms and practices, such as profiteering from the disaster affected people in Chile, privatisation of essential public services in Italy, or deregulation of environmental protection in Brazil, to name a few, may instead lead to an exacerbation and creation of new risks. Through the series of disaster capitalism experiences around the world we indicate why we must be very cautious when designing solutions without challenging the pre-existing socio-cultural and politico-economic conditions that helped to create the problem in the first place.

Keywords: Disaster capitalism; Neoliberalism; Disaster risk; International study; Disaster vulnerability

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# Introduction

Disasters can provide a window of opportunity: for some, this is about changing for the better; for others, it is for profit, resource extraction, and reinforcing the business-as-usual *status quo*. Such profiteering has in recent years been framed as 'disaster capitalism', an approach adopted mainly by the corporate class and governments –at multiple scales– to directly profit from disasters, economically and politically. Disaster capitalism encompasses processes that go before (*ex-ante*) and after (*ex post*) the occurrence of a disaster, and it relies on the framing of disaster as long-term processes of risk accumulation and disaster manifestation (e.g., Oliver-Smith, 2019; Blaikie et al., 1994). From this perspective, the phenomenon of disaster capitalism takes advantage of accumulated risk at the point of release, while neoliberal policies and practices encourage such behaviour.

Whilst there is evidence exploring how disasters are profitable for some, to date there are few studies specifically framing this profit from a disaster capitalism perspective and its implications for the policy realm, especially from a comparative international level. In this sense, this work is an initial step to such exploration by providing a preliminary international overview of the root causes, behaviours, and consequences of disaster capitalism, and its contribution to the systemic nature of risk and disaster risk creation. We aim to achieve this through analysing the role and contribution of the public and private sectors in the generation and accumulation of disaster risk through disaster capitalism processes.

Drawing on secondary data sources and literature review, we analyse diverse *ex-ante* and *ex-post* experiences of disaster capitalism in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, India, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, and the United States, within a timespan that goes from European colonial period (15th to 18th centuries) until the current Covid-19 pandemic, which is considered here as 'syndemic' (Fronteira et al., 2021): the resulting synergical interplay of biological and social conditions. Our results show that disaster capitalism does not occur in a vacuum, nor are all cases perfectly horizontal or linear, and that pre-existing socio-cultural and politico-economic contexts matter to risk creation and disaster processes. In each investigated country, we were interested not only in the current country's experiences of disaster capitalism, but also in preconditions for disaster capitalism. We wanted to understand *why* the phenomenon of disaster capitalism was likely to occur, in the context of the narrative of local history and evolution of society. We also wondered why it was so common for neoliberal reforms and practices to dominate during and after a disaster 'event', and how we might be able to identify and track the phenomena. We organised our data collection strategy around exploratory variables that inform such questions, that is, the 'root causes', 'behaviour', and 'outcomes' of disaster capitalism. These variables are epistemologically grounded in the Pressure and Release (PAR) model developed by Wisner et al. (2004), being disaster and risk considered social constructions.

Likewise, neoliberal practices such as profiteering from the affected people in Chile or reforms aiming to dismantle the environmental protections in Brazil, show that when disasters are not addressed with strategies for positive social change, this can lead to creation of vulnerability and disaster risks. Case studies examples demonstrate that, when the decision-making space is occupied by self-interested actors, it poses a challenge to all disaster risk reduction (DRR) and resilience efforts made by citizens, communities, national and local governments, and international organisations. Nevertheless, we sustain that the currently dominant and positivist DRR and resilience approaches used by governments and international organisations, and

their efforts for DRR and resilience, are indeed embedded into rationalities and practices comprising neoliberal governance (Zebrowski, 2013).

## How and when: Framing disaster capitalism

While archetypal forms of 'disaster capitalism' can be found well before the end of the 20th Century (Farinella & Saitta, 2019), its conceptualisation is credited to Naomi Klein, who, in her 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, illustrates what she observed as "orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities" (Klein, 2007, p.6). Such 'raids' emerged, or became more evident, during a period of global consolidation of capitalism – and neoliberalism in particular – as it was taking place in the 1990s. At the same time, disasters increased worldwide too, both in frequency and severity (Field et al., 2012; Pelling, 2003). In this way, disaster capitalism has evolved through the combination of two global processes impacting all scales: disasters and neoliberalism. Harvey describes neoliberalism as the latest form of capitalism, "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills." (Harvey, 2005, p.4). Thus, in the context of catastrophic events, disaster capitalism refers to the introduction of structural and non-structural neoliberal policies carried out by governments aiming to establish "an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p.2); this is what Schuller and Maldonado (2016) call 'instrumentality of catastrophe' for advancing neoliberalism. This instrumentality also refers to the treatment of disasters as market opportunities, as mentioned earlier.

Thus, the simultaneous increased impact of disasters and the expansion of neoliberalism have made it possible to observe how, in specific contexts, neoliberal practices such as economic profiteering, privatisations, deregulations, ideological mechanisms, among others, have tended to accumulate in pre-disaster and amplify in post-disaster processes (Sandoval et al., 2020; Chmutina & Cheek, 2021).

Since the publication of Klein's book (2007), several academics have taken up the task of defining and investigating disaster capitalism, applying methodological frameworks from a variety of fields such as anthropology (Schuller & Maldonado, 2016), development studies (Paudel & Billon, 2020), humanitarian aid (Donini, 2008), and the role of local authorities and local elites (Imperiale & Vanclay, 2020). Authors find common ground in seeing that disasters are conceived by private and public actors alike as 'windows of opportunity' to introduce radical political reforms and/ or for economic profiteering. It is important to distinguish neoliberal reforms from neoliberal practices: the former generally relate to short- and long-term government actions –i.e., structural, and non-structural policies in Harvey's terms (2005), and the latter for economic profiteering, generally related to large private companies and corporations. Both reforms and practices can take place prior and after the occurrence of a disaster.

The mentioned 'windows of opportunity' is key, Klein asserts, as "only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around." (Friedman, 1962, quoted in Klein, 2007, p.6). Klein states that, crucially, profiteers and sponsors of neoliberal ideas seem to always be waiting for a crisis to 'shock', while positive social actors sometimes are less ready to act.

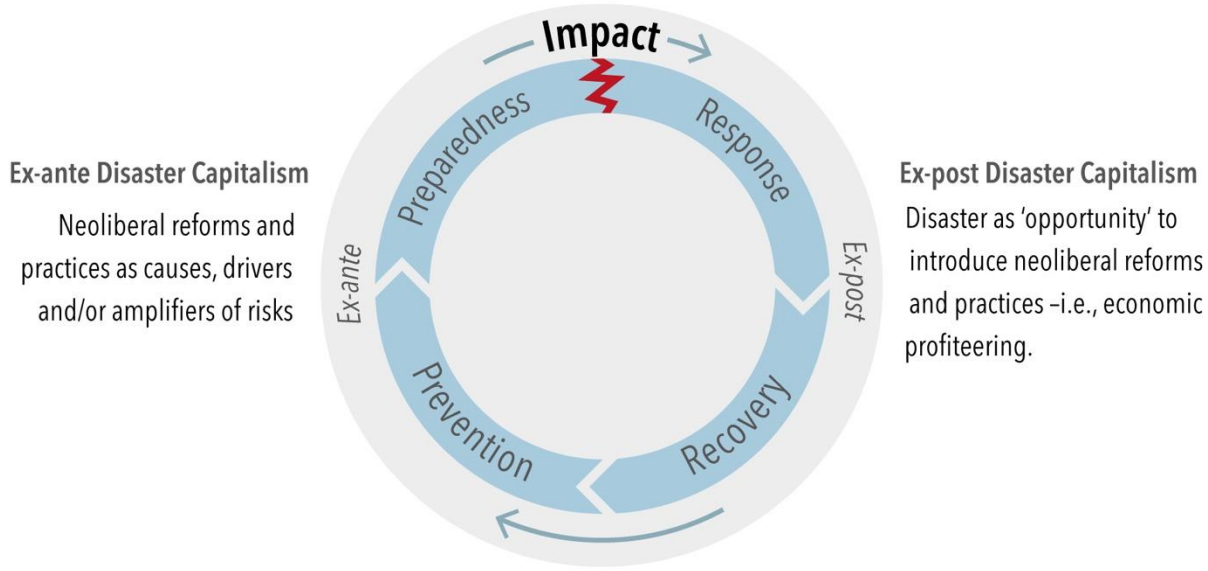
Schuller and Maldonado define disaster capitalism as a "national and transnational governmental institutions' instrumental use of catastrophe (both so-called natural and human-

mediated disasters, including post-conflict situations) to promote and empower a range of private, neoliberal capitalist interests" (Schuller & Maldonado, 2016, p.62). For the authors, this definition contains three constituent elements: the increasing role of private companies within 'public' responses; the instrumental use of catastrophes; and promoting neoliberal capitalist interests.

To address the issue of when disaster capitalism is witnessed, we refer to de Waal (2008) who notes that it is being mainly present during both post-disaster and pre-disaster processes. During post-disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction, most contracts are issued by governments, who often follow short-circuited or closed tendering processes, creating immense opportunities for corporate revenues. In a pre-disaster phase, de Waal asserts that profits are also to be made in early-warning and prevention systems, and "indirectly through the chance for positive media exposure when a corporation can be presented as acting selflessly in the public interest" (de Waal, 2008, p.xi). In other words, disaster capitalism can be observed throughout all disaster risk management phases[1]. In fact, Sandoval et al. (2020) make this aspect explicit: "[disaster capitalism] can be defined in terms of processes that go before (*ex-ante*) and after (*ex post*) disasters" (Sandoval et al., 2020, p.833). The authors assert that *ex-ante* disaster capitalism covers neoliberal reforms and practices that have caused or amplified disaster risks, while *ex-post* disaster capitalism refers to the use of the occurrence of disasters as an opportunity to introduce (or reinforce) neoliberal-style political adjustments and as a market opportunity and economic profiteering (see Figure 1), which eventually could exacerbate pre-existing risks. For example, neoliberal reforms that may amplify risks include privatisations and deregulations, such as those, for example, related to the dismantling of the Amazon's environmental protection in Brazil, as will be explored later. Thus, the *ex-post* disaster capitalism connects directly to the creation of disaster risks and to development models, specifically to the progression of disaster vulnerabilities in society. From this perspective, the study supports the necessity of a paradigm shift from discourses of disaster risk reduction and resilience to 'Resisting Disaster Risk Creation' (Wisner & Lavell, 2017).

[1] Although the authors do not believe in the linear temporal nature of a disaster risk management phases, the distinction is used here for the clarity of the argument.

**Figure 1. Disaster capitalism mapped on to the disaster risk management phases (adapted from Sandoval et al. 2020).**




Although studies from de Waal (2008), Schuller (2008), Schuller and Maldonado (2016) and others (Paudel & Billon, 2020; Gunerwardena & Schuller, 2008) concentrate on the role of governments, public institutions, and international economic organisations (IMF, World Bank, and the like), the role of the private sector, and corporatism in particular, in the generation and accumulation of risk has not been thoroughly addressed in the academic literature (Sandoval et al., 2020). This is despite the realisation of "*the grim reality that this is all part of a plan, a rigged system that empowers and enables predator capitalists to flourish*" (von Meding, 2016). The international overview presented in this paper is an initial attempt to explore the process of disaster capitalism at the intersection of public and private roles.

In the next sections, we will explain our methodological approach to analyse these three elements of disaster capitalism in our case studies that show how public and private actors participate in disaster capitalism and in the systemic nature of disaster risk (creation).

# Methodology

Our theoretical and methodological frameworks are grounded in social science perspectives on disasters and development. We specifically adopt social constructionist and political economy approaches to disaster based on the Pressure and Release (PAR) model (Wisner et al., 2004). This means that we consider the construction of disaster vulnerability as a determinant of disaster risk and disasters, and assuming that the multiple dimensions of risk are ultimately determined by social, economic, political, and cultural factors (Hewitt, 1983; Pelling, 2003; Wisner et al., 2004).

The research design is exploratory and inductive, primarily employing secondary sources through a desk-based literature review strategy (academic, journalistic, and grey) to collect the information.

We adopt a research modality of holistic (single-unit of analysis) multiple-case design (Yin, 2003). Here, the 'unit of analysis' deals with the fundamental problem of defining the 'case' (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010): in our study, the unit of analysis is defined by the phenomenon of

disaster capitalism (as per Gunewardena & Schuller, 2008; Sandoval et al., 2020; Schuller, 2008; Schuller & Maldonado, 2016; Klein, 2007). From this perspective, we investigate neoliberal reforms and practices by public and private actors in terms of introduction of 'opportunistic' policy changes after disasters; treatment of disasters as 'market opportunities'; and reforms and practices prior to the occurrence of a disasters. In other words – and adopting the PAR model – we look at causes, drivers, and/ or amplifiers of disaster risks (as well as the factors of resistance, as will be discussed in the later sections).

Our review reveals that whilst we can chart diverse manifestations of disaster capitalism in different countries over time, the evidence is fragmented. For that reason, we use the above categories to array existing cases of disaster capitalism, facilitating its analysis and comparability. Given that root causes of disaster risk may be distant in time, the timespan of analysis goes from European colonial period (15th to 18th centuries) right up until the current Covid-19 pandemic (i.e., 2020-2021). Based on information availability and access, we examined cases from Brazil, Chile, Colombia, India, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, and the United States. Our sources include academic studies, international, governmental and non-governmental reports, legal documents (i.e., laws, bills), media archives and press releases, newspaper articles, and social media available from a range of sources, such as Google Scholar, PubMed and Scopus for academic literature; Reliefweb, PreventionWeb and publication databases from leading international humanitarian agencies such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and International Rescue Committee (IRC), among others for grey literature; and media coverage and opinion pieces published in popular newspapers as well as international independent outlets. The information for each case was searched for in the dominant language of each respective country (i.e., Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish) and then translated into English. Search terms (and their appropriate equivalents in each language) included: disaster, capitalism, neoliberal, reforms, businesses, government, private sector, corporations, public services, among others.

The collected information was organised for comparative purposes and studied through qualitative content analysis techniques. For the analytical process and due to the nature of disaster capitalism, we have attempted to systematise each country experience based on the following guiding questions:

A. Root causes: Why does disaster capitalism occur? What are the necessary conditions?

B. Behaviours: What neoliberal reforms and practices are adopted before and after a disruption?

C. Outcomes: What happened in the end? Who profited and how? Is there resistance against disaster capitalism? Who and how disaster capitalism is being fought back?

These questions work as exploratory variables and provide an insight into the role of public and private actors on the propagation of disaster capitalism and their contribution to disaster risk creation, as well as the role in the systemic nature of risk. These variables are conceptually grounded into and organised as the "Progression of Vulnerability" diagram of the PAR model (Wisner et al., 2004, p.51), where 'root causes', 'dynamic pressures' and 'unsafe conditions' (i.e., 'Behaviours' or material expressions of disaster capitalism's behaviours), and the 'disaster' (i.e., 'Outcomes' or results of disaster capitalism's behaviour) are depicted in a sequential way.

# Disaster capitalism – country case studies

## Brazil

In his seminal book *Open veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, Eduardo Galeano (1970) pointed out several forms of colonial exploitation in the mercantilist and capitalism systems over the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) countries. These forms of exploitation were and are driven by interests in different types of commodities such as silver, gold, diamonds, soy, sugar, coffee, and other types of raw materials. According to Galeano (1970), national elites and military personnel comply with this imperialist regime and conduct policies that serve the interests of foreign corporations, mainly from the UK and US, and that also increase inequalities of access to land, water and other essential resources for living. Although written over 50 years ago, Galeano's analysis is useful to understand the underlying causes of disaster capitalism in Brazil today. In the midst of Covid-19 pandemic, the Brazilian Ministry of Environment tried to use the pandemic as an opportunity to dismantle environment protection, giving permission for mining activities in the lands of indigenous tribes (Spring, 2020). Ricardo Salles, the Minister of Environment, clearly stated: let's use the opportunity of this pandemic to implement our project of reducing 'bureaucracy' (Spring, 2020). In other words, take apart environmental regulations to implement extractivist projects in the Brazilian Amazon. Several corporations signed a letter to support the position of the Minister of Environment to dismantle environment protection.

Amazon soil is old and intensely weathered, generally acidic, infertile, and subject to compaction from intense solar radiation. Land use change, agriculture, and cattle ranching are increasing deforestation and generating effects in the ecosystems, which can be worsened by recurrent droughts such as occurred in 2005, 2010, and 2016. These are 'dynamic pressures' (Wisner et al., 2004) that propitiate disaster risk creation in the Brazilian Amazon. Soy cultivation (80 percent of which is destined for animal feed) is a major driver of deforestation in the Amazon basin (Global Forest Atlas, 2021). Cattle ranching is another driver of deforestation. Brazil supplies about one quarter of the global market, and there are approximately 200 million head of cattle in the Amazon turning approximately 450,000 $km^2$ of deforested Amazon in Brazil into cattle pasture (Global Forest Atlas, 2021). This process has been increasing during the Covid-19 pandemic (Rajão et al., 2020), as part of the disaster capitalism process. The pace of Brazilian soybean exports increased 48 percent in the first week of June 2020, compared to the June 2019 average, and the China importation of Brazilian soybean increased by 27.4 percent (Reuters, 2020). Usually, large privately-owned properties are responsible for illegal deforestation. According to Rajão et al. (2020), 2 percent of the properties in the biomes of Amazon and Cerrado are responsible for 62 percent of the illegal deforestation, 20 percent of soy exports, and 17 percent of beef exports.

Several international, national, regional and local NGOs, and scientists and representatives of municipal and State agencies are confronting the pandemic and fighting against the wave of destruction. The struggle against Amazon's destruction is international and has gathered parliamentarians, scientists, artists and civil society organizations (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Menton et al., 2021). Likewise, several webinars, technical reports, newspaper articles, and other kinds of data dissemination are being implemented to report the Amazon's destruction (Raftopoulos & Morley, 2020; Vatican News, 2019). Additionally, it is important to highlight the works of Ministerio Público's units in the Brazilian States, which is a public agency that represents and defends the social interests legally, including environmental issues.

## Chile

David Harvey called Chile "the first [modern] experiment with neoliberal state formation" (2005, p.7), where structural neoliberal reforms were imposed after the *coup d'etat* by the dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1973. This new neoliberal state was characterised by strict privatisation campaigns of key public services such as education, health, pension, and housing during the 1970s and 1980s (Solimano, 2012). Nearly three decades after the end of dictatorship in 1990, the neoliberal state remains ubiquitous, in part, due to the still-in-place Political Constitution of 1980. This defines the role of the State as 'subsidiary': the State can intervene in an economic matter only when the private sector cannot do so or is not of its 'interest'. Furthermore, it establishes that if any private initiative or corporation is 'discriminated' by a State action, the State must provide compensation or indemnification: the right to private property is considered one of the fundamental rights.

These historical processes may explain current neoliberal practices and behaviours related to disasters as evident in reconstruction (Imilan & González, 2017), rehabilitation and response (Sandoval & González-Muzzio, 2015), and as drivers of disaster risks (Farias & Flores, 2017). Covid-19 pandemic has also provided various examples. For instance, in June 2020, the parliament approved a law that suspends households' cutting offs for water, electricity and gas during the 'State of Catastrophe' established by the right-wing government of Sebastian Piñera. A month later, the government vetoed this law considering it 'unconstitutional', as private companies providing these services will be severely affected by this State action (Orellana et al., 2020). Other behaviours include the marketisation of reconstruction after the 27 February (27F) 2010 Maule earthquake as well as the liberalisation of reconstruction planning to private corporations (e.g., PRES Constitución, see Sandoval & González-Muzzio, 2015).

The outcomes of these neoliberal practices have been diverse. Large companies have recurrently been benefiting by direct, non-tendered, allocation of public resources, sometimes at the expense of small local businesses – e.g., the Gift-cards after the 2014 Valparaiso fires (Sandoval & González-Muzzio, 2015). Other outcomes relate to a 'resistance' to disaster capitalism. For example, the Movimiento Nacional por la Reconstrucción Justa (National Movement for a Just Reconstruction, MNRJ), created after the 27F, discussed important disparities in response, relief, and reconstruction between rural and urban areas, and the abandonment by both the market and the State (Pulgar Pinaud, 2016; González-Muzzio & Sandoval, 2016). Another example is the movement of *Ollas Comunes,* similar to 'community soup kitchens', created during the pandemic as a consequence of ineffective response by the government (González-Muzzio et al., 2021).

Although most of the origins or causes of disaster capitalism in Chile point out to the systematic dismantling of the social welfare by the dictatorship of Pinochet from the 1973 onwards, other neoliberal practices can be also linked to colonial and post- and neo-colonial relationships. As pointed out by Sandoval, Wisner, and Voss (2021), Chilean elites remarkably continue a top-down extractivist approach that has favoured the European and American, and more recently Chinese, economies. Hence, indigenous peoples in Chile have historically been most affected by policies on resource-based industries such as forestry and mining, creating vulnerabilities associated with poverty, marginalisation, and urban disaster risks (Sandoval et al., 2021).

## Colombia

From the late 1980s/ early 1990s, Colombia experienced a sustained introduction of neoliberal reforms carried out by different governments on areas such as housing, education, health, and retirement plans (Torres-Gonzáles, 2010; Villamizar & Uribe, 2009). These were appropriated as a response to several economic crises in the 1980s under excuse of a necessary 'economic openness' (i.e., liberalisation) influenced by the Washington Consensus (Torres-Gonzáles, 2010).

One example of disaster capitalism in Colombia, as driver, cause and/or amplifier of risks, relates to the privatisation and then liberalisation of the housing finance system in the 1990s. According to Torres-Gonzáles (2010), the deregulation of a system called Unidad de Poder Adquisitivo Constante (Unit of Constant Purchasing Power, UPAC) caused a substantial but 'suicidal' improvement (i.e., profit margin) of private banks in terms of long-term mortgage loans. When interest rates increased in the 1990s due to a series of foreign and domestic economic crises, household mortgages doubled and tripled (Urrutia & Namen, 2011). Many debtor families lost their homes, and the once thriving housing finance system went into crisis until it collapsed in 1999. This is a case where liberalisation of a previously managed system by the State, and 'exposed' to market rules, was applied to a sector that does not necessarily respond to market considerations – low-cost housing for the poor – ending with the use of a financial system to advance neoliberal ideas. Here, significant rural-urban migration in the 1980s was used to cause 'panic' of the consequences of inaction.

As expressed by participants of the Camargo and Hurtado's study (2013), the rigidity of the formal housing credit market somehow 'pushed' people to opt for more flexible and informal forms of housing and urbanisation. For Zuluaga and Grisales Vargas (2020), the development of informal settlements in Colombia are clear manifestations of the capitalist mode of production and planning applied over the urban space since the 1990s. Several neoliberal policies tended to exacerbate inequalities both socially and spatially and, with that, an unjust distribution of hazard exposure, vulnerability, and risks (Blanco, 2010; Zuluaga & Grisales Vargas, 2020).

## India

Historic traces of disaster capitalism are evident in Indian context since the British rule. For example, research by Amartya Sen (1981) on famine of 1943 in north-east India, proves that the famine was caused by the imperialistic and exploitative agenda of the government (e.g., lack of the British Raj's acknowledgement of food crisis) rather than the actual lack of food availability. The famine incapacitated community to self-mobilise socially, economically, and physically, and created a perfect opportunity for the British Raj to push for their agenda to expand their power. They created two major and long-lasting impacts: one, economic dependency on external providers, and two, social divide within the country; both of which are visible even today (NIOS, n.d.).

Economic dependency was created among skilled artisans by the colonisers who systematically dismantled and destroyed the local manufacturing systems (e.g., weaving, silk, cotton, sugar, salt, cloth dying, ship building, machine manufacturing). Over time, the skilled artisans lost their diversity of livelihoods and had to move towards agriculture, increasing their reliance on land (NIOS, n.d.). Moreover, the British Raj's economic policies and land revenue taxes kept the poor farmers in check, increased their own wealth, and consolidated their power over the country.

The social divide between the Hindus and Muslims was instigated based on their religious beliefs, values, and ideologies, leading to separation between India and Pakistan in 1947, despite secular democracy being the foundation for India. Alan Heston (1965) asserts that the seeds for capitalism were sowed after India's independence in 1947, under the guise of socialist reforms proposed by the government. Examples of socialist reforms include nationalisation of major banks, land reforms, and abolishing financial perks for Indian Prince. Land reforms increased the power of the government and the private sectors, as they owned the majority of land. Land became the biggest commodity, which could seek rent-based income, creating a divide between the landowners and the landless. Over time, neoliberal approaches took roots – e.g., the New Economic Policy in 1991 liberalised and globalised Indian economy to compete with China (Jaffrelot, 2018) – and flourished.

These historical roots may explain well the current practices of the public and private sector. Covid-19 pandemic may provide a historic turning point for global disaster capitalism. In case of India, the pandemic has been used as an instrument by the current government to push their ideological, political, and economic interests.

Politically, the government has changed their narrative from proactive (i.e., a brutal lockdown in March 2020, asking 1.3 billion people to not step outside their home for three weeks, with only an hours' notice; to hands-off tactics that divert people's attention away from government incompetency (Sharma, 2020) – e.g., underperforming healthcare system. By February 2021, the government thought the country had gained herd immunity allowing for business-as-usual with political rallies for elections and mass congregations (e.g., Kumbh Mela along river Ganges and at Cricket ground), leading to a horrific second wave, described by the local doctors as 'Covid tsunami'. Once again, the government has put the entire blame for the second wave of Covid-19 infections on a virus variant.

Socially, the government has managed to mute Muslim community in India (comprising approximately 13 percent of population), either by forceful inclusion – e.g., repealing constitutional rights of the Muslims living in the state of Kashmir (Roy, 2014; Roy, 2020) – or forceful exclusion – e.g., by omitting Muslims along Assam-Myanmar border from obtaining naturalised citizenship of India if they cannot produce required ancestry documents (Ramasubramanyam, 2020).

The outcomes of the nationalist and neoliberal reforms and practices during Covid-19 are multi-fold, however, most visible issue is the spike in mortality induced by depleted healthcare system and resurfacing of deep-rooted systemic issues. Thus, historic economic inequality, religious tensions based on social divide, and neoliberal political reforms that are unjust towards poor (e.g., lack of healthcare provision evident in high rates of tuberculous and diarrhoea) are used by the government and private sector to consolidate political power and push for the right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology.

### Italy

Structural reasons made disaster capitalism a relevant factor intervening during the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy. Since the 1990s, a series of market-oriented reforms were implemented by containing public investments to meet the Maastricht criteria and the requirements of the Stability and Growth Pact by the European Union (Bramucci et al., 2020). After 2008, the global financial crisis and the response to the European debt crisis led to significant austerity measures in critical public services such as healthcare, mobility, education, and welfare. The progressive destruction of the public sector led to an increasing privatisation of services,

representing the disaster capitalism ideology that drives the relationships between the Italian government and its citizens during a crisis (Imperiale & Vanclay, 2020). Recurrent resources and job cuts also occurred in the healthcare sector, leading to a reduction in health system performance (Arcà et al., 2020), consequently inhibiting a prompt response during the Covid-19 pandemic (Bramucci et al., 2020). Indeed, healthcare staff had to operate under pressure and burnout, with infections spreading across hospitals, care homes, and general practice facilities, and with limitations for regular healthcare activities that caused deaths indirectly related to the pandemic.

Disaster capitalism also operated by prioritising profits over public good. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in the first months of 2020, the role of Confindustria, the Italian Industrial Association, has been instrumental. As a powerful stakeholder in Italy, it influences political decision making at multiple scales around responsive pandemic strategies. Confindustria has been accused of putting pressure on the Italian government to not shut down large and small firms, and in particular in the most productive regions of Northern Italy (Nava, 2020). This could have contributed to turn some workplaces into infection clusters and to spread infections in public transport and acquaintances.

Disaster capitalism-related predatory behaviours mainly occurred to manage the emergency. For example, dedicated Covid-19 facilities have been built in different regions of Italy such as Lombardy, Marche, and Campania, but these facilities never worked properly due to lack of coordination with other healthcare facilities (Di Vito, 2021) or corruption (Musella, 2020), with a subsequent waste of millions of euros.

Nevertheless, several social initiatives have been put in place to resist disaster capitalism. Forms of cooperation and solidarity at neighbourhood scale have been born across the whole country, with formal and informal solidarity networks groups (including associations and local businesses) assisting people most in need during the pandemic, such as people who lost jobs and houses, low income, or those exposed to violence and abuse. These groups provided mainly food, sanitation products, toys as well as accommodation for those most in need. Some examples are EMERGENCY (2021), operating in several regions of Italy, and Nonna Roma (2021), a volunteer association that together with other solidarity networks provides food for low-income families in Rome. These forms of solidarity replaced the inaction of the Italian government in supporting those most in need before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, many formal and informal groups of experts and academics have contested and criticised the lack of resources and transparency in managing the pandemic (il manifesto, 2020). In particular, they have urged to take measures to protect the most vulnerable people and to implement environmental and social measures that improve the quality of life and protect from the occurrence of the next pandemic.

### Japan

Japan has been governed amidst the tensions created by the as of yet incomplete transition from a developmental state to a fully neoliberal one. While the ruling Liberal Democrat Party has embraced neoliberalism as both an ideology and a policy regime since the 1980s, important elements of the developmental state, such as a strong social safety net and a top-down management system of government bureaucrats, remain – at present – unextractable from national government. Because of this, it can be difficult to apply an analysis of disaster capitalism developed in other contexts and employ it neatly to Japan. This does not mean,

however, that disaster capitalism is not an effective lens in regard to Japan's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In July 2020, the national government of Japan launched the Go To Travel campaign. This initiative (launched on what would have been the opening weekend of the Tokyo Olympics) was designed to restart the stagnant domestic Japanese economy that was languishing under Covid-19 restrictions. It worked by paying out subsidies to cover up to fifty percent of travel expenses for domestic trips. The majority of this funding was through subsidies from the national government, while a smaller part was issued in regional coupons that were issued as both paper and digital currency that could be accessed via a mobile phone (Davies, 2020). Predictably, large numbers of people began to travel around the country after months of staying at home. As international travel was still severely restricted, this was overwhelmingly domestic tourism. However, as the infection rates varied widely between prefectures, the distribution within Japan was not equal: tourist centres such as Kyoto bore the brunt of increased visitors.

The Go To Travel campaign was accompanied by similar initiatives: Go To Eat, Go To Event, and Go To Shōtengai (shopping street). Under the Go To Eat program, people were able to buy vouchers at a reduced price that could then be traded in at restaurants across the country in place of cash. The national government would then pay out the difference to the restaurant (Jackman & Katanuma, 2020).

As new cases of Covid-19 began to rocket upwards preceding the New Year's holiday period, the Japanese government shelved Go To Travel in late December of 2020 (Jiji Press, 2021). Other programmes continued but were not heavily publicised. Tourist areas across the country were rocked by cancellations. Researchers at Kyoto University produced a study linking the surge in Covid-19 cases to the Go To Travel program (Swift, 2020). Nevertheless, as cases of the virus began to wane in early February 2021, the national government contemplated restarting the program. It should be noted this was at the same time that foreign residents of Japan coming back into the country from overseas were required to sign a pledge stating that they would safely quarantine themselves or risk being stripped of their residency status.

The extent of disaster capitalism during the pandemic in Japan is still a moving target. However, the Go To Travel campaign –and related programs– reveals that the national government, constrained by the ideology of neoliberalism, could not simply pay people to stay home and businesses to stay closed throughout a global pandemic. Rather, it chose to subsidise individual consumer activity in order to maintain tourism as an economic engine. As Japan struggles with hospital capacity and a shortage of medical workers, the government is still in discussions (as of February 2021) to restart the Go To Travel Campaign (Reynolds & Nobuhiro, 2021).

### United Kingdom (UK)

Whilst the roots of UK disaster capitalism can be traced all the way back to its colonial past (the legacies of which are still prominent), the 1970s rise of the Thatcher administration and a subsequent diminishing role of the State led to its current manifestations. The decade following the 2007-2008 financial crisis, was best encapsulated by David Cameron's 2009 speech proclaiming that "the age of irresponsibility is giving way to the age of austerity" (SayIt, 2009). This manifested in severe cuts to welfare (including the NHS), further privatisation, and political propaganda.

Although Covid-19 pandemic has perceived as ‘unexpected’ and ‘unprecedented’, the 2010 UK National Security Strategy described a potential pandemic as a priority risk. The 2015 National Security Risk Assessment, which fed into the UK’s first Biological Security Strategy (Government of the UK, 2018), stressed that a deadly disease outbreak involving "pandemic influenza or emerging infectious diseases" was one of the most significant threats facing the country. The strategy warned that this type of emergency could cause hundreds of thousands of deaths and cost the economy billions and lead to substantial insecurity overseas and harm global trade.

In the UK, disaster capitalism during Covid-19 pandemic has predominantly manifested in two forms: economic/monetary gains, and personal profiteering. The former is best demonstrated by the failure of the ‘track and trace’ system (Molloy, 2020a; 2020b). Its development and operation were awarded to Serco, a multinational company that provides outsourced public services and security services. Despite the failure to deliver, Serco’s £108 million Covid-19 tracing contract (the value of which could rise to £432 million) allowed Serco to ‘refine’ its own service level agreements, oversee its own monitoring, and rules out automatic penalties for underperformance. The company won additional £45 million to provide Covid-19 test centres – yet the multi-million-pound deal was not made public.

An example of the latter could be the protection of Dominic Cummings (at the time, the PM’s Chief of Staff). He broke the rules of the lockdown in March 2020 but has then been protected by the PM and his allies, thus remaining in power until November 2020.

The best simultaneous demonstration of both was the Government’s decision in early March 2020 and then again in November/December 2020 to ignore the expert advice to ‘lockdown’, therefore putting the economic activity and their own popularity (among the voters) before public health. Consequently, by the end of January 2021, the UK became the first country in Europe to report over 100,000 Covid-19 deaths over the course of the pandemic and reached the highest death rate per capita in the world (CSSE-JHU, 2021).

The lack of support for the most marginalised also became obvious when, for the first time in 70 years, UNICEF had to launch a domestic emergency response to help feed children (Storer, 2020). Meanwhile, the Institute to Fiscal Studies’ (Blundell et al., 2020) report on the impacts of Covid-19 on inequalities in the UK pointed out that “the rich are *suffering* in a different way – they are unable to spend on… the recreational activities that typically account for a relatively large share of their budgets” (authors’ emphasis).

The UK is one of the wealthiest countries in the world –yet the wealth is very much concentrated in the hands of few. As ‘The Rich List 2020’ (The Times, 2020) suggests, the wealth of the richest thousand people in the UK stood at almost £800 billion, increasing since 2019. But even in the context of such appalling disaster capitalism and opportunism, the welter of community responses to the pandemic gives hope, with thousands of support and volunteer groups across the country. Support for the NHS has rocketed, with an increasing awareness of the courage of staff and volunteers: mutual care proliferated. Is this the return of the society – the one that Thatcher in her famous quote said does not exist?

## United States (US)

Despite widespread belief in its foundational myths, like 'the land belongs to everyone', the United States was birthed in the genocide of settler colonialism and developed on the back of slavery (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). The privately accumulated capital from these early ventures has furnished the holdings of the FIRE (i.e., Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate) industries that continue to wield outsized influence on American politics. The Covid-19 pandemic has in many ways exposed the underbelly of a nation steeped in white supremacy and grown into a superpower through land theft, exploitation, imperialist wars and transnational (threat of) violence. The pandemic has also underscored the strong relationship between industry and legislators (Olson et al., 2020), all pointing out to a vast and entangled web of elements in history that compose the root causes of disaster capitalism in the US.

Disaster capitalism has taken a unique form under the US federalist governance structure that entails state-by-state jurisdictional control over policy implementation in lieu of a national strategy. This has produced a breakdown in Covid-19 response, with some states implementing strict mitigation measures while other, sometimes neighbouring, states implementing fewer mitigation measures and perpetuate virus transmission (Hale, 2020; Yehya et al., 2020). In lieu of a national response, particularly over supplies of personal protective equipment and ventilators, state governments have been put in a position to outbid each other, as well as federal agencies, in efforts to secure supplies for their residents (Feldman, 2020; Kettl, 2020). These bidding wars are a direct reflection of disaster capitalism's manifestation in a federalist system like the US.

At the federal level, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) demonstrated that the priority of the federal government during a pandemic was to bail out corporations that could not survive an operations pause (Doggett & Whitehouse, 2020). Compared to other wealthy countries, the people of the US have received little support. The Trump administration and Republican legislature provided two relief payments, of US$1200 and US$600 respectively, to American citizens. The following Biden administration and Democratic legislature has proposed US$1400 in relief aid, after a lengthy campaign season where US$2000 in relief aid was part of the major party platform. This discrepancy, along with overall lack of support, has caused strife while 45 of the 50 top corporations report record profits (MacMillan et al., 2020). These tensions are punctuated by flashpoints such as the 2021 GameStop stock run (Li, 2021; Phillips, 2021). Such instances revealed the capitalist power structure in the United States, where even legal organised activity by the average person is thwarted by a wealthy, connected elite who are able to enact swift institutional change to maintain advantage and profit margin, that is, the *status quo*.

The Covid-19 has impacted the most marginalised members of society along familiar racial, gendered, aged, disabled, classed lines. These are, of course, groups not invited to define the terms of a patchwork Covid-19 response in the US. Despite implemented measures like a national eviction moratorium and the limited relief packages, processes like legal eviction proceedings and credit collections have been allowed to continue. This means the most severely affected residents will have financial delinquency on their record, making it difficult to secure housing and financial support for seven years following the pandemic. Such processes also enable lending banks, predatory creditors, and corporate entities to charge higher prices for access to services.

Nevertheless, these impacts are met with resistance. Emergent response to Covid-19 has driven participation in neighbourhood-based mutual aid organisations that connect aid-seekers, aid-givers and volunteers with local political organising networks (Domínguez et al., 2020; Springer, 2020). Nationwide, mutual aid practices quickly standardised through digitally mobilisation, particularly in strengthening lines of support through the 2020 wave of racial justice protests following the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor (Adamczyk, 2020; Davis, 2020; Elizabeth & Wicker, 2020; Fields, 2020; Mancall-Bitel, 2020; Covid-19 Messengers, n.d.). The phenomenon of disaster capitalism that has so clearly framed the United States' response to the pandemic has produced new tactics enacting historic resistance strategies.

## Discussion

In this study we have presented preliminary evidence of the prevalence of disaster capitalism across the world through eight diverse case studies. We compared countries' experiences, based on the root causes, behaviours and outcomes of disaster capitalism, and found rich and diverse manifestations that span from different historical origins of the causes, at diverse moments in all disaster risk management phases (i.e., behaviours), to direct and indirect outcomes. Table 1 summarises the differences as well as similarities of disaster capitalism experiences among selected countries.

**Table 1. Comparison of country experiences on disaster capitalism.**

| Countries | Root causes | Behaviours | | | Outcomes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | (1) Ex-ante | (2) Ex-post practices | (3) Ex-post reforms | |
| **Brazil** | Distant past | x | | x | Impact/Resistance |
| **Chile** | Recent past | x | x | | Impact/Resistance |
| **Colombia** | Recent past | x | | | Impact |
| **India** | Distant/Recent past | | | x | Impact |
| **Italy** | Recent past | x | x | | Impact/Resistance |
| **Japan** | Recent past | | x | | Impact |
| **UK** | Distant/Recent past | | x | | Impact/Resistance |
| **US** | Distant/Recent past | x | x | | Impact/Resistance |

*Source*: Authors, 2021

*Note*: (1) neoliberal reforms and practices prior to the occurrence of disasters – then as causes, drivers, and/or amplifiers of disaster risks (ex-ante disaster capitalism); (2) treatment of disasters as 'market opportunities'; (3) and introduction of 'opportunistic' neoliberal reforms after disasters.

What our review shows is that, firstly, the country cases hardly ever occur in a vacuum, nor are they linear (in a temporal sense), brining methodological implications and limitations. Some countries' experiences of disaster capitalism have causes tied to colonial or neo-colonial interventions in other listed countries: e.g., US Government (CIA) intervention in Chile and the fall of the Allende government in 1973 (Shiraz, 2011). Historically, patterns of intervention such as the US in Latin America and France in Africa, have precipitated the neoliberal policy turns that facilitate disaster capitalist turns (Yohannes, 2002; Cottam, 1994; Galeano, 1970). More recently, the US and other NATO countries have impacted supply streams and hoarded Covid-19 vaccines by direct purchase agreements with pharmaceuticals (BBC News, 2020; Georgievski, 2021) leaving the low-income countries to rely on COVAX, which would achieve only 20 percent vaccination coverage worldwide (Burgess et al., 2021). These nationalist Covid-19 response strategies undoubtedly carry implications not only for the internal domestic pandemic political economy, but practice and policymaking for all nations wishing to secure vaccine supply. In such ways, our interrogation of disaster capitalism extends beyond nation-scale into a tangled, more dynamic set of international relationships, each with their own histories of uneven projections of power. This element of discussion is also methodological as the heterogeneity of the cases, that is, their causes, behaviours, and outcomes of disaster capitalism, are not easily comparable. A rigorous account of the proposed analytical elements will require a deeper historical and governance perspectives to try to disentangle better the vast and complex causal chain of disaster capitalism across scales and timeframes.

It is also important to acknowledge the role of both public and private sectors in disaster capitalism – and the relationship between them. Most of the selected cases point out to sudden or slow-onset structural political changes (e.g., the violent establishment of a neoliberal dictatorship in Chile in 1973 or the progression of neoliberalism in Japan since the 1980s) as

determinants of their experiences on disaster capitalism. Such structural and non-structural policy changes are also determinant for the relationships between sets of rules, actors, and organisations dealing with disaster risk reduction, risk management, and vulnerability progression: the disaster (risk) governance (Sandoval & Voss, 2016). Disaster governance, especially the vertical and horizontal arrangements among different actors (Renn, 2008), has a fundamental influence on disaster capitalism through neoliberal reforms and practices that determine the production and prevention of the growth of *ex-ante* disaster vulnerability as well as during and after disasters.

The establishment and sedimentation of neoliberal frameworks has underlined two elements that need to be re-considered to prevent and avoid disaster capitalism. Firstly, the Covid-19 pandemic exposed that the public sector (and in particularly its role in provision of welfare and safety nets) is essential. Yet the extreme neoliberalist approaches have systematically tried to disempower it, and after years of budget cuts and liberalisation, public institutions found themselves overwhelmed by the magnitude of the efforts needed to cope with disasters, such as the Covid-19 has revealed. Thus, to avoid this asymmetry between the public and private sectors during disasters, the private sector should allocate resources and provide for welfare in a more equal way than the public sector. Secondly, we have seen how the private sector and corporate class have begged for unlimited public spending and social support in order to save private investments during the pandemic. All this stresses that the economy is a collective system and that the well-functioning and effective public services are fundamental during (as well as before and after!) disasters. As asserted by Saad-Filho (2020), the economic burden of the pandemic will be extremely high, and there is no way that public services can, or should, bear this burden. If a democratic treatment of the impacts but also of the costs of disasters is imperative, alternatives such as progressive taxation, nationalisation, default where necessary and a new 'green' growth strategy, should be on the table (Saad-Filho, 2020). Likewise, the mentioned cases of the 2021 GameStop stock run in the US and the legal tactics of the Chilean government over household's suspensions of privatised basic services reveal how the corporate class and governments are intertwined, aligned, ready to act under a legal shield that allows to quickly change laws and adapt institutional frameworks to maintain the *status quo.*

# Conclusion

In the study we have found that the relation of disaster capitalism with processes of disaster risk creation and role in the systemic nature of risk are of fundamental importance. Most cases highlight neoliberal practices and reforms as causes, drivers, and/or amplifiers of disaster risks. From the dismantling of Amazon's environmental protection in Brazil (which exacerbate climate change and its impacts) to housing evictions of low-income residents in the US (which accentuate disaster vulnerability in cities), the evidence points out that when social interests are not well protected or exposed to market turbulences, unscrupulous profiteers can take advantage or destroy them, regardless of the consequences for the majority of the people and the planet's ecosystems. In this respect, disaster researchers and organisations should assume that addressing (and resisting!) disaster risk creation must turn into a priority, and this cannot be achievable through traditional positivist scientific approaches. Addressing the root causes of disasters requires the political and social commitment as fundamental input for radical socio-cultural change. Perhaps for that reason, transdisciplinarity and other approaches (such as action-research initiatives and design-thinking) that allow us to better understand the social dimension of the systemic nature of risk, are becoming more relevant than ever: furthermore, social sciences and humanities are desperately needed to navigate the complexity of social systems (see an example in Voss & Lorenz, 2016). This is also true for the Covid-19 syndemic, where the socio-economic, political, and cultural factors, in combination with biological, play a critical role on the development of epidemics (Fronteira et al., 2021).

It is noteworthy that in most cases, there were also manifestations of 'resistance' to disaster capitalism. From the creation of grassroot organisations that turned later into active actors of policy change in Chile, to rejuvenated support for the NHS and other public services in the UK, to movements such as the 2019 Social Outbreak in Chile, all these are a part of a resistance challenging traditional patterns of neoliberal governance. These and other initiatives provide a foundation for questioning neoliberal public agendas and neoliberal practices.

In the progress of this study, we also found that certain trans- and multinational processes and organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the European Union, and private corporations – some of which derive profit from endeavours such as trade in weapons and private prisons and are consolidating their position during the Covid-19 pandemic (Mancias, 2020) – could act as agents of neoliberal practices and reforms' sponsors. We consider that the role of trans- and multinational factors of disaster capitalism demands further research.

Finally, one may argue that all the root causes of the experiences of disaster capitalism, including the ones presented in this study, can always be traced back to the origins of modern capitalism, in other words, to the distant past (see Table 1). Yet, it is this distant past that leads to the creation of the root causes in the 'recent past', the current behaviours, and the future action (or inaction).

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