

Semiotic historicism, class, and sustainable politics

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M. H. Abrams has said that the great poems of the British Romantic period were written in a spirit of post-revolutionary disillusionment. This suggests a sublimation of political energy which, blocked from expressing itself in society, evidently found powerful expression in poems that constitute either a substitute for politics or a new form of the political. The question is whether this kind of poetry represents an acting out and symbolic displacement of the political, or whether it constitutes a new form of cultural politics in its own right. The answer will depend on how one regards the possibilities of revolutionary change. If one rejects the possibility of a total transformation of society by extraordinary means, then the alternative aim—the sublimation of an impossible political desire—would seem inevitable and necessary. Yet if political desire has already sought but failed to find a satisfactory revolutionary expression, the need for compensatory displacement will still make itself felt. The text that sublimates political energy will do so differently if that energy has first expressed itself, whether in political action or in discourse. The text written in the spirit of post-revolutionary disillusionment would then be a mixture of a political act and its negation, the sublimation of the political in the service of another aim.

In terms of political economy, this would represent a loss of energy. Reorientation after the moment of failure and disillusionment typically takes the form of a defensive conversion to the other extreme and the withdrawal from previous political commitment. A famous example can be found in William Wordsworth's autobiographical poem, *The Prelude, or, The Growth of a Poet's Mind*, as the poet in ironic terms recalls the heady time in the late 1780s when revolutionary hopes were high:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven! O times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute took at once
The attraction of country in romance! (1850 ed., *Book Eleventh*, ll. 109-112)

Horrified by the reign of terror and the Napoleonic wars, Wordsworth turns to the project of poetic self-constitution, producing an epic-length autobiographical poem that traces the path to the discovery of his poetic vocation. *The Prelude* was published in several new editions which successively expanded and revised the narrative of the poet's personal growth. A different kind of revision is an option for later generations of writers or critics, who may analytically expose the means by which political energy is repressed in the poem. This is a difficult task, requiring the resolution of ambivalence, making a distinction between the formation of a self that is consistent with democratic ideals, and the re-inscription of this self in the political status quo.

This pattern represents one way in which literature can be political in both a positive and negative sense, and it is also an example of how a text may be the site of a lost but recoverable potential. My interest in this pattern in the present context focuses on how a certain conception of class and class agency figures in the aim of political transformation. The critique of revolutionary politics implied above, along with the retention of an essentially Marxist conception of class, will here be developed by means of a semiotic-historicist reconstruction of Marxism. I will use the Marxist economic concept of class but reject the prophecy of a revolutionary working class, in arguing, first, that there is no longer any possibility of fundamental paradigm change, no new mode of production; second, that class is complex—it can be embodied or abstract, divided against itself, and defined within different frames of reference—national, international/global, and transcultural. My chief point is that this class analysis can be the basis of a sustainable politics, avoiding the fluctuation of revolutionary politics, as well as utopian thinking, between excessive hope and either disillusionment or increasingly dogmatic faith. My second major point is that this structural analysis lends itself well to the study of literature. I will look at some literary examples that demonstrate various aspects of the argument: the negative consequences of the belief in a single class as agent of change; the dissident form of sustainable politics; examples of sustainable politics within international and transcultural frames of reference.

Class and its frames of reference

Social class has been theorized in many ways, but essentially these can be placed in two categories, one that is essentially economic, emphasizing relations to the means of production, the other functional, adding status and power as determinants of class. The first theory is Marxist, the second associated primarily with Max Weber, who argued that the failure of Marxian political predictions could be explained by the regulation of the market by an autonomous state power. I will assume in what follows that status and power can nevertheless be derived from class as determined primarily by economic relations, since status is closely related to occupational type and level of income, and state power can be explained as the function of a stabilizing class cooperation. Moreover, if revolutionary implementation of communism is a historical mirage, as I maintain, then class cooperation or compromise in the formation of the state is the only strong alternative that remains.

In an American context, to which the literary texts discussed below belong, it was a long time before sociologists and political scientists took up class analysis in a manner corresponding to their European counterparts. Evidently, they were influenced by the relative lack of cultural markers of class as well as by the American ideology of social mobility. Later, the relative failure in the 1960s of leftist political movements to have any lasting institutional impact as far as class is concerned, as well as the collapse of the Soviet Union, might explain the relative absence of class in various types of discourse, including literary. One could also cite the homogenizing effect of consumer society, where nearly everyone seems to self-identify as “middle class”, while the older term “bourgeoisie” is felt to be awkward or even embarrassing as it conjures up the image of its opposite, the working class. To move closer to literary discourse as such and its particular predilections, the by now common postmodern critique of agency and structure no longer regards class as a credible given, and rejects the concept of an economic base or deep structure. It must be admitted that the relative neglect of class in literary discourse at least in part reflects objective conditions—but classes do exist, albeit in such complex forms that they do not offer a consistent political base. The various social systems within which we live are different frames of reference for the determination of class, such that different class categories may apply to the same individuals or groups considered across several frames. A working-class individual

within a national frame of reference may more accurately be classified as part of the capitalist class within an international frame.¹ Countries where cheap labor is available stand in relation to importing countries as working-class to capitalist class. At the same time, this relation can be modified by the conditions and interests that workers nevertheless are aware of having in common. And the situation is even more complicated when the working-class of the importing country regards foreign labor as competition rather than the source of cheap commodities, or when the exploitation of labor abroad also has the effect of an economic stimulus.²

When one expands the framing of class beyond the ambivalent international relation to the maximum size of the global scene in its entirety, or, as I would like to call this frame—transculturality, since the international context is frequently named global—class becomes a reciprocal relation. In the transcultural context of a single global system, an increasing number of nations are beginning to feel the effect of an abstract capitalist class, the dominance of a form of capital which is not even personified by human beings. It is a tendency that conjures up the vision of humanity ironically gathered together as a proletariat, forever working to increase productivity, forever producing more wealth at the price of greater effort and greater discontent. The requirements of the capitalist system for constant expansion potentially places all of its economic subjects in a subordinated position, working for the sake of an abstract mechanism, a Moloch that feeds on human beings to keep its machinery running.³ Concurrent with this process is the tendency to exploit nature more and more radically, and in that sense all of humanity comes to have exactly the opposite kind of class position as well, personifying the capitalist class in relation to a working-class without anthropomorphic form, but maximally concrete, such that nature itself

¹ I use the term “capitalist class” not only to refer to capitalists but also to their allied managers, professionals, and small business owners (petty bourgeoisie).

² For a source of “world-systems theory” of class in a Marxist tradition, in which international relations are analyzed as class relations, see for example the work of Immanuel Wallerstein. For a liberal capitalist view, see Johan Norberg. Positions for and against globalization tend to coincide with the political right and left, capitalist and working class arguments, respectively, though arguably the impact on the working class in any locality is ambivalent.

³ This alludes to a surreal episode in the silent film *Metropolis*, a striking example of German expressionist cinema directed by Fritz Lang.

becomes the embodiment of an exploited proletariat subject to progressive immiseration.

The reciprocity of the transcultural framing of class consists in the occupation by all political subjects of both class positions, but, as we have just seen, the primary content of the frame is negative. In its extreme development transculturality corresponds to the Marxian vision of capitalism as the culmination of a pre-historical nightmare. Just for this reason, however, it also contains the opposite potential, since it conceivably gives all human beings an incentive to work for radical change when their shared interest is transparent and collective survival necessary. Of course, there is also the choice of refusing the implications of reciprocal transculturality, ultimately maintaining international forms of exploitation at the price of war and terrorism. In any case, the reciprocal form of transculturality, opening the necessity of cooperation and coexistence for the sake of survival, defines a type of political practice that is already a present possibility even though it is by no means a dominant feature. One should perhaps call it an ethics, since it is a matter, not primarily of negotiating present political opposition and conflict, but of anticipating a future state, a matter of taking the long perspective. Ethics in this sense is the anticipation of a future form of political justice, the orientation of action toward a supposed future rather than toward immediate needs or demands. The visionary quality of this ethical aspect suggests why transculturality should make its chief appearance within literature.

Semiotic historicism

The three frames of reference for class are characteristic of late capitalism, a condition which I argue is non-transcendable. The future that we are constantly moving into is a limit that is constantly undergoing displacement even as it is crossed. There is no new historical paradigm available, but only the reintegration of past paradigms and the elimination of their residual elements, though there is still the possibility of egalitarian reform. I would define socialism not as a new economy or mode of production, but as a more humane and equal organization of the capitalist mode, a question of long-term policies in which the antagonism between classes or the antagonism inherent in any economic exchange is suppressed, a relation in which the cooperative aspects come to dominate

and neutralize the negative. The social welfare state is a more rational form of capitalism, though the failure of the more powerful players in the economy to take anything but short-term self-interest into account tends to restrict any rationalism of this kind.

Marx generates his analysis of capitalism by unraveling the secrets of its elementary particle—the commodity. That is my cue for a semiotic, though very schematic, rewriting of the Marxian modes of production, with the added specification, according to a linguistic theory that was not available to Marx, that the commodity is a sign. More correctly, the material sign value and the linguistic sign are inextricable. This is the claim that Jean Baudrillard makes in an early work entitled *For a Critique of the Political Economy of The Sign*, and he develops this claim further as follows:

All efforts to autonomize this field of consumption (that is, of the systematic production of signs) as an object of analysis are mystifying: they lead directly to culturalism. But it is necessary to see that the same ideological mystification results from autonomizing the field of material production as a determining agency. Those who specify culture (sign production) in order to circumscribe it as superstructure are also culturalists without knowing it: they institute the same split as the cultural idealists, and constrict the field of political economy just as arbitrarily. (ch, 5, p. 2)

The commodity is the condition of possibility of the sign, of theorizing language in semiotic and non-referential terms. Together with Marx's observation that capitalism separates use value and exchange value this constitutes the key to a semiotic historicism. By varying the relation between signifier and signified, exchange value and use value, from unity to differentiation, one can construct a model of cultural change, a series of semiotic modes which are also modes of production.

Communism, however, is theorized as not just another mode of production; Marx calls it the beginning of human history. Skepticism with regard to a communist utopia is predicated not only on the lack of historical evidence of progress toward this state and the evidently implausible scenario of a working-class revolution, but also on a semiotic analysis of modes of production. If the relation of exchange value and use value, like the relation of signifier and signified, has three variants—unity, splitting and differentiation—one can classify modes of production in three major categories on this semiotic basis: hunting and gathering, agriculture, and capitalism. There is then no possibility of structural variation beyond the capitalist differentiation of exchange

value and use value, except the possibility of a more adequate integration and recuperation of past modes. We are at the end of the finite sequence of unity, splitting and differentiation. Since the succession of modes depends on the open-ended reintegration of previous modes, however, it does not follow that we have reached the ultimate economic and political system at present. We can assert the end of a fundamental type of paradigm change and yet also assert that history is open-ended.

For each of the three semiotic modes, class relations can be modeled structurally as a series of three subject-object relations which are also types of intersubjectivity. Even though the basic forms of bourgeois political philosophy appear in the Renaissance and Enlightenment, empirical investigation of cultural change suggests there is a correlation between mode and period, for example between mode three and period three, something which can also be explained in terms of the formal model as such. This means that the cardinal class relation of the third, capitalist mode lies in the differentiated third period which is characterized by democratic institutions. The structurally differentiated relation between subject and anti-subject enables a relation of equality and reciprocity, as opposed to the classical period in which the split, only partially differentiated, relation is distinctly hierarchical. In other words, the classical form of capitalism in the wake of the Industrial Revolution involves a reappropriation of precapitalist social relations, the semblance of feudal hierarchy. And clearly, residual elements can be found even in the third, democratic period, as long as its institutions exhibit a democratic deficit.

With the massive proletarianization and consequent exploitation of labor by mid-19th century and later the overproduction crisis that precipitated the Great Depression, it is no wonder that the ideology of revolutionary change, the revolt of an oppressed class, receives considerable support. In Western Europe and North America, however, conditions were evidently not ripe for revolution, while in Russia the successful revolution constructed a society that was destined for economic collapse as well as the failure to secure the human rights theorized in Marxian communism.

National reference

As a literary memoir aiming to represent a generation of American writers, Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return* captures this time of crisis in a remarkable way. His account of the so-called lost generation of the 1920s is a fascinating layering of historical points of view which sheds light on the formation of revolutionary ideology as well as later disillusionment. From the vantage point of the 1930s and the depression, Cowley tells the story of American writers and artists who went abroad, chiefly to Paris, in the 1920s. He paints a critical though in part sympathetic picture of the Bohemians, as he calls them, who relocate from Greenwich Village to the Left Bank. Similarly, he is skeptical of art for art's sake and the Dada movement as a turning away from social reality. Chiefly, *Exile's Return* is critical of what Cowley, using a conspicuously Latinate term, calls deracination. The exile of American writers and artists begins already on American soil, from which American writers and artists are uprooted, in the sense that their education has been one of alienation from American society and disparagement of American culture. According to Cowley, the return in a more politically aware time enables a reintegration in American society, as well as the production of important literature.

In the second edition, published in 1951, the political standpoint of the 1930s is still clearly discernible, even though Cowley has toned down its political message. He deleted or reworked several passages in the book which he felt partook too intensely of the extravagant political hopes of this time. Also, he added a prologue and epilogue in which he explained his earlier political values, and modified his narrative in accordance with a critique of his earlier judgment.

In the prologue to the 1951 edition Cowley states:

the whole conclusion of the book was out of scale with the beginning; and there were also the political opinions that intruded into the narrative. I had to explain to myself, before explaining to the reader, that the book was written in the trough of the depression, when there seemed to be an economic or political explanation for everything that happened to human beings.... We hadn't learned—nor have most of our statesmen learned today—that human society is necessarily imperfect. (11)

One might be tempted to accuse Cowley of historical revisionism, but his explicit commentary on the revisionary process is just as much a confessional affair, offering us a rare glimpse of ideological change as it

takes place in the mind of a single individual and writer. Cowley goes on to say that

opinions about the future of society are political opinions. There were not many of them in the book I wrote in 1934, but there were too many for a narrative that dealt with the 1920s, when writers were trying to be unconcerned with politics, and I have omitted most of them from the new edition... It seems to me now that many characters in the story, myself included, did very foolish things—but perhaps the young writers of the present aren't young and foolish enough. (12)

Yet in the epilogue, his critique has less to do with foolishness and the lack of understanding than with the palpable pressure of a profound social and economic crisis:

Then, with the German crisis and the banking crisis in the early months of 1933, the intellectual atmosphere changed again. Thousands were convinced and hundreds of thousands were half-persuaded that no simple operation would save us; there had to be the complete restoration of society that Karl Marx had prophesied in 1848. Unemployment would be ended; war and fascism would vanish from the earth, but only after the revolution. Russia had pointed out the path that the rest of the world must follow into the future... (293-294)

That the author should initially embrace the project of social restoration and then come to reject it is understandable in light of this historical narrative. Yet Cowley complicates his explanation by a tone that retains the self-critique of foolishness; the hyperbolic expression of revolutionary hopes in the quoted passage has a satirical effect. Evidently it is difficult to look back on a period of political idealism that came to virtually nothing. But what one misses is the empathy with a former self as conditioned, after all, by powerful circumstances. I submit that the apologetic or satirical tone testifies to a certain loss, a compromising acceptance of social realities in which a certain amount of repression is required.

In our time, much of the regulation that constrained free-market capitalism under the reform that in the US is referred to as the New Deal, the so-called compromise between labor and capital, has been either dismantled or circumvented. Remembering the depth of the crisis precipitated by the stock market crash of 1929 and noting the self-censorship imposed in the period of political compromise, we can perhaps restore something of the original urgency while yet seeking

alternative solutions. We might devise a politics free of irrational fluctuation: a sustainable politics.

This politics has something common with 18th century political philosophy, namely the orientation toward a common good. But a sustainable politics still affirms the necessity of party politics; it is a matter of representing one's political position while insisting on its coexistence and exchange with other positions, and expecting other parties, other political positions, to do the same. One's political strategy then becomes a question of how those expectations are met. This is not a question of a politics available in the mainstream, but of dissidence, the subversion of the standard political polarization that characterizes Western democracies today.

International reference

To examine a literary text in which this kind of dissidence is practiced, Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, we move up to the 1960s, a time when a very different kind of crisis takes place in the Western world. It is a political and cultural crisis, taking place in affluent industrial societies, but also in their former colonies, in the form of liberation movements, whether in the form of decolonization and civil rights or the demand for equality of gender and sexuality. But it is also, especially in the United States, a period of intensified political polarization, as a large segment of the American public opposes government policies in Southeast Asia. It is a time of a revolt against the reactionary policy of communist recontainment that led the United States to fight a war in Vietnam.

Mailer's *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* is perhaps the most profound American book to come out of the 60s. Within a broad account of political movements and the power structures they challenge, Mailer narrates his experience as a participant in the 1963 demonstration at the Pentagon against the war in Vietnam. Formulating the basis of political dissidence in the context of arguments for and against the war, Mailer states that Marx taught us to reason against him. Presumably, what Mailer has in mind is that in articulating the conditions of its own historical genesis, Marxism could be open to revision with respect to conditions which had not been anticipated—it could be self-correcting.

Assuming such a revisionary Marxism, Mailer takes a position on the war that departs from the positions of a polarized national politics. Writing about himself in the third person, he states: “Mailer was bored with such arguments. The Hawks were smug and self-righteous, the Doves were evasive of the real question. Mailer was a Left Conservative. So he had his own point of view. To himself he would suggest that he tried to think in the style of Marx in order to attain certain values suggested by Edmund Burke” (208). He criticizes government policymakers for not having read Marx closely enough: “They had not read Marx. They had studied his ideas, of course; in single-spaced extracts on a typewritten page! But because they had not read his words, but merely mouthed the extracts, they had not had experience of encountering a mind which taught one to reason, even to reason away from his own mind” (209). When Mailer refers to the innovators of communism, he implicitly refers to himself as a Left Conservative, while also referring with approval to the capacity of communism to renew itself as it spreads to new countries. Thus he departs equally from the conservative Hawks who fear communism in any form and the liberal Doves who downplay the threat that communism should spread across Southeast Asia:

Communism seemed to create great heretics and innovators and converts (Sartre and Picasso for two) out of the irreducible majesty of Marx’s mind (perhaps the greatest single tool for celebration Western man had ever produced). Or at least—and here was the kernel of Mailer’s sleeping thesis—communism would continue to produce heretics and great innovators just so long as it expanded. (210)

Identifying himself—or his fictional persona named Mailer—as a Jew, Mailer positions himself as both outsider and insider, and characterizes America as a contradictory, “schizophrenic” Christian nation. Communism is the great antithesis to Christianity, that which Christianity fears most of all, and therefore a key to political dissidence for Mailer. As a *Left* Conservative, he favors the autonomy of developing countries, and their right to choose their own form of government, over the neo-colonial politics of the United States: “leave Asia to the Asians.” Like Malcolm Cowley’s critique, Mailer’s is articulated within an international context, but unlike Cowley’s, Mailer’s politics itself takes an international form. That is to say, while Cowley reads the American interest in foreign culture and politics as symptomatic of a deficient

estimation of things American, Mailer is more concerned with American foreign policy as such. While Cowley's belief in socialist revolution yields to disillusionment and the resigned conclusion that the world is imperfect, Mailer maintains his political position, evidently because of its doubleness. He continued for the rest of his life to write books on explicitly political subjects which expressed his dissident position, and he did so at the expense of losing his status in the academic literary establishment as one of America's foremost writers.

Mailer's dissidence is directed against international relations and predicated on the ambivalence of class in this context, as discussed earlier in this essay. Transcultural dissidence, by contrast, addresses a frame of reference in which all political subjects occupy the positions of both labor and capital, promoting a reciprocity within the other two frames that is already implicit in the possibility of long-term aims. The relation between classes within the national frame of reference is contradictory and antagonistic at any particular moment of exchange, but acquires a reciprocal character when the ultimate necessity of a sustained relation between two interdependent parties is acknowledged. Or, to put it another way, class relations become reciprocal when the transcultural frame of reference is brought to bear on the more restricted frames.

Transcultural reference

The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia by Ursula Le Guin is an unusual kind of science fiction novel in which transculturality is embodied in the plot and in which the heuristic form of utopian thinking constitutes a powerful alternative to apocalyptic and unambiguous utopianism. Although science fiction conventions are followed in this novel through the representation of another and future world, one could say that the word "science" stands, not for futuristic technology, but for a fictional form of theoretical physics. *The Dispossessed* is built on two structures: first, a spatial structure that is geographical, planetary and political; second, a theory of time associated with narrative discourse and with the unity of "Sequence" and "Simultaneity", the central contribution to theoretical physics by the protagonist, Shevek.

The scene of the novel is a planet and its inhabitable moon: Urras and Anarres. Anarres was populated by proponents of collective anarchism whose descendants are experiencing difficulties in keeping the

original anarchist dream alive. Collectivist ideology too easily shades over into jealousy, so that professional accomplishment comes to be perceived as self-advancement and egoism. *The Dispossessed* opens with the controversial departure of the scientist Shevek for Urras, where he will meet with his counterparts in the field of theoretical physics. This journey by someone who is suspected of “egoizing” will be the means by which the novel explores the meaning of its subtitle: *An Ambiguous Utopia*. Shevek holds to the anarchist ideology of Anarres, yet because he has experienced the negative aspect of collectivism as repressive of individual creativity and achievement, he proves receptive to certain aspects of life in A Io, a nation that bears a close resemblance to the United States.

Urras is characterized by international relations that are patterned on those of the planet Earth in the 1970's. It is the moon of Anarres which is the exception, the country which does not fit the allegorical pattern. Since the collectivist anarchy of this society represents the antithesis of the values of competitive individualism and material affluence which are the rule in A Io, and since Shevek comes to understand that conversely, A Io defines itself as a negation of Anarres, the novel enacts the return of the repressed in a complex unity of reciprocal exchange that we can associate with transculturality. Urras and its planet satellite must always negate each other, but they do so reciprocally, because each latently contains the other.

This is to say that the ambiguous Utopia, as a positive collective project which discriminates against individual achievement, is in part a critique of utopian aims, in part a representation of the good society. There is neither support for the revolutionary attitude that inspired writers of the 30s, nor acceptance of the disillusioned acceptance that all societies are imperfect. It might be objected that there is a world of difference between the Marxist hopes of the 1930s generation and the effort in *The Dispossessed* to build an anarchist society patterned on the work of Peter Kropotkin, considered to be one of Le Guin's sources. Kropotkin argues that there is a human capability for mutual aid, a legacy from evolution that makes institutionalized government unnecessary. In both Cowley's and Le Guin's texts, however, there is a conflict and struggle between two classes, and, both Marx and Kropotkin

are outspoken opponents of idealist Utopias.⁴ The major contrast in terms of transcultural exchange lies in the relative acceptance of both class perspectives in *The Dispossessed*, and the detachment from the partisanship that propels a narrative sequence of endless action and reaction. This detachment coexists with a commitment to a complex synchronic unity involving an exchange between two double positions. “True journey is return” is an enigmatic saying by the founder of Anarresti society. Shevek comes to realize its meaning when he returns home, accomplishing the synthesis of sequence and simultaneity, the synchronization of narrative.

Like Mailer’s, this is a double position that is dissident and that looks beyond the class hierarchies of the national and international frames. It is a pattern of reciprocal affirmation and negation which is, so to say, free from birth: it is not subject to the repeated patterns of excessive and deficient political action. Transculturality is the key to a sustainable politics, whether envisioned as the double class position of humanity at the historical limit or as another concept of doubleness that articulates class positions but does not take absolute sides, except in so far as it meets one-sided opposition. While the future in which humanity must resolve class antagonism or be destroyed seems distant, its signs are nevertheless present. Considering the determination of class within different frames of reference and rejecting utopian or apocalyptic scenarios may help to restore class as an effective political category that supports a sustainable politics, offering a transcultural vision of human cooperation that can be articulated in many forms, among them the cultural forms of literature.

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⁴ As Mark Tunick puts it in an essay on *The Dispossessed*: “Of course Marx was critical of utopians for ignoring the real material forces shaping society and for fancying that they could draw a blueprint of how the world ought to be that could be realized in practice by simply willing it. The activist Peter Kropotkin also distinguishes anarchy from Utopia, Utopia being a wished for ideal, anarchy being based on an analysis of existing tendencies.”

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