

IMPERIAL CAPITAL, COMPRADOR DEMOCRACY AND SUBALTERN JUSTICE

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Abstract

The arrival of neo-liberal capital in India under the guidance of a facilitating state and its ever expanding hegemony in the civil society has resulted into newer areas of domination and subalternisation. This paper basically deals with these emergent forms of subalternity and antagonisms in contemporary India. Taking stock of the recent criticism of the project of Subaltern Studies, the paper proposes for a 'reformed' Subaltern Studies that addresses the material conditionalities of subalternisation of the various disenfranchised groups for a radical politics of counter narratives of resistance.

Since India's tryst with economic liberalization there has been a lot of brouhaha about its rising economic might, but as recent literatures such as the works of Arundhati Roy, Sen and Dreze's *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions* (2013), Utsa Patnaik's *The Republic of Hunger* (2007) show this growth has come at a severe price. While a minority has been triumphant at their primitive accumulation drive, the vast underbelly of India has been left outside its growth radar. The reform policies of the government often proved to be catastrophic for the peasants, the gulf between urban and rural India has become gargantuan

and the political–capital nexus has further disenfranchised and dislodged the tribals and the adivasis of India. This lopsided and inequitable growth and the subsequent subalternisation /Calibanisation of the vast number of people have also intensified discontents. In a country of the Global South such as India the question of justice has to engage with this unjust and unequal divide between this ‘two Indias’ and the problem of ‘distributive justice’ and socio-political liberty/security must be addressed. Listening to and providing with the needs of the disenfranchised populace of India is a necessary precursor for a just republic. This paper would deal with these issues and would argue that subaltern studies, which started as a voice of justice in Indian historiography by foregrounding the hitherto unacknowledged struggles of the subalterns needs to reactivate its critical edge and should engage more pro-actively with this neo-subalterns of the imperial capital and comprador democracy to re-energize ‘public reason’ for the ‘fairness’ of justice.

In the subsequent sections, we would first deal with the comprador nature of democracy in its liberal avatar by a short discussion of the reflections on democracy by Arundhati Roy and continental philosophers such as Derrida and Habermas. After that we would discuss the reasons behind the facilitating and comprador nature of Indian democracy, locating it in the post-90 neo-liberal reforms which have resulted in a capital-political nexus. In the final section, after a brief discussion of the trajectory of Subaltern Studies in India, we would argue that a reformulation of subaltern Studies is necessary to incorporate within its theoretical and political ambit the neo- subalterns of neo-liberal imperial capital for an informed public discussion on justice in India.

Comprador/Lumpen Democracy

The pathologies or aberrations of democracy demand critical analysis and the growing incidents of human rights violation and the repressive mechanisms of statecraft/marketocracy in the name of democracy call for a radical reformulation of existing democratic paradigms. Democracy in its existing avatar is flawed and it needs some restructuring or philosophic radicalisation. Continental thinkers such as Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, Jacques Rancière have betrayed similar concerns about the current oppressive trends in democracy. In the post 9/11 world Derrida had talked about the *Démocratie à venir* or the coordinates of future democracy-to-come and the Habermasian praxis of deliberative democracy also envisions an ideal emancipatory discourse of enlightened public sphere and participatory democracy which is empowering and averse to the mechanisms of neo-capital.

In the introduction to her non-fictional work, *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy*, Arundhati Roy has foregrounded the aporias of Indian democracy. The ‘Failing Lights of Democracy’ has resulted in, as she said, ‘Demon-crazy’ in India. Things have come to such a pass that one cannot help being virtually apocalyptic about the autocratic nature of democracies and Roy’s apprehensions are not unfounded when she asks, “while we’re still arguing about whether there is life after death, can we add another question to that cart? Is there life after democracy? What sort of life it will be?” (Roy 2009:2). So the writing on the wall is that democracy in its existing avatar is flawed and it needs some restructuring or philosophic radicalisation. The questions that Arundhati asks are,

“What have we done to democracy? What have we turned it into? What happens once democracy has been used up? When it has been hollowed out and emptied of meaning? What happens when each of its institutions has metastasized into something dangerous? What happens now that democracy and the free market have fused into a single predatory organism with a thin constricted imagination that revolves almost entirely around the idea of maximizing profit? Is it possible to reverse this process?”(Roy 2009: 144).

For the sake of critical analysis we chose to confine our study within the span of three of Roy's most talked about non-fictional works, namely *Listening to The Grasshoppers: Field Notes to Democracy*, *An Algebra of Infinite Justice* and *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*. Roy in these books has carried forward the same critical agenda of exposing the collusion of the state with the market and the unlimited powers of the state waging war against its own citizens. Through her virulent exposure of the inefficacy of the modern state, Roy has articulated her critical engagement in her non fictional works by unearthing the hegemonic nature of present day democracy and sovereignty. Roy has in that way created a critical niche for her in the impoverished domain of Indian critical theory. The conceptual radicality and critical rigour of Roy's non-fictional works retain the critical legacy of the Frankfurt School thinkers and contemporary European ethico-political theory (Rush, 2004:6). Roy's theorizations of neo-imperialism, genocide, lumpen democracy, corporatocracy, state-terrorism etc have launched a strident critical cartography. We opine that Roy's revolutionary excursus on Pax Americana and on the totalitarian metanarratives of absolutist democracies are akin to what eminent philosophers such as Derrida and Habermas have been saying for long. For a better idea about such critical and philosophical parallelisms we can refer to the Derridian notion of radical democracy and the Habermasian concept of procedural or deliberative democracy. The clubbing of Roy in the Derrida Habermas fraternity is inspired by the fact that Roy, like both these celebrated European philosophers, is a strong pleader for the constitution of a vigorous public sphere where existing norms of governance and prevailing modes and practices of power would be problematised. It is indeed great to note that Roy has elevated herself through her non-fictional writings into the height of radical deconstructionist thinkers such as Derrida and Giorgio Agamben. The visionary and militant parallax views of those thinkers have inspired Roy and she in her own ways have performed something radically similar as Derrida, Agamben, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in her assessment of contemporary politics, ethnic cleansing and Neo-empire.

Works such as the *Algebra of Infinite Justice* and *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* have addressed the fast growing network of global developmental corporate agents. Thinkers like Roy has done and is continuing to do the singular job of exposing and problematising the conventional tenets of a comprador democracy and unlike her European compatriots like Derrida and Agamben, Roy has explored in detail more issues of domination like corporatisation, developmental economics, separatism etc in an innovative and compelling manner. What makes Roy more effective is her praxis centric weltanschauung. At the end of the day the bottom line is that critical trajectories in the works of contemporary thinkers such as Agamben, Negri, and closer home Arundhati Roy and their untiring critical activism may

help in fashioning a new zeitgeist. Having explained the *raison de etre* of various radical tirades, and the critical preoccupations of continental and Indian thinkers we conclude that the coming community of the future democracies will have to be extra-vigilant and deconstructive for the realisation of a better radical politics. The post-Tahrir Square world needs further exploration of the democratic process and for that new thinking in the domain of radical politics would be immensely helpful.

Demistifying the “reform” in Indian Political Economy

In this section we would be very briefly talking about the neo-liberal reforms in India which resulted in the emergence of the Indian state as the facilitator of global finance capital. As the 90s set in, Indian political economy, with decentralization and liberalization in the offing underwent a massive change. Reform measures had manifold ramifications in the Indian political economy which ultimately led to diverse outcomes in the domain of political. The state and its whole legitimacy as being the sole guarantor of rights and livelihood were gradually vitiated. Actually, in the 90s, the ambitious reform measures not just exploited the already chronic forms of inequality and coercion in the social structures; it ensured that those subterranean forces wear on an ostentatious legitimacy in the rhetorical trumpeting of “growth”. This tremendous craving for ‘growth’ then becomes the single most signifiatory chain which subsumed almost all its counter narratives. Notwithstanding this debate around the context and the actual necessity for such audacious reform in July, 1991, this much was evident at the surface that a new synergy was spawned in the economy in parameters of revenue earning, in putting leash around the current account deficit and in increasing the savings. The result was the tremendous, even unmatched growth during the 1989-1991 periods. But the crisis in June-July of 1991 arguably ‘compelled’ India approach IMF. The economy again took three decisive turns in the precise direction as mandated by IMF,

1. Total withdrawal of import restriction which coincided with the creation of larger share for private investment into the economy.
2. A very strict fiscal discipline in proportion to the revenue earned was established. The obvious ramification was that govt. has to cut short on subsidy, social sector investment.
3. Constant and gradual measures for disinvestment with structural reforms like deregulation of the domestic market and the absolute trade liberalization except in few sectors like defense, atomic energy was granted.

There were other subsidiary measures included in the package. These all turns and twists are enunciated below numerically:

1. Among the reforms, deregulation of industry was on the top of the agenda. New Industrial Policy which was announced did away with MRTP and made provision of 51 per cent FDI. The license procedure was entirely abolished, except in selective sensitive sectors like defense, narcotic and psychotropic substance, arms and ammunition, alcoholic drinks and

tobacco. Public sector monopoly was kept in just two sector, atomic energy and railway. Entry restriction through MRTP was also abandoned. MRTP act was tabled for restructuring to accommodate merger, amalgamation, and takeover. Similarly, the new Companies Act was under process, which aimed at allowing acquisition of and transfers of shares. 40% foreign equity investment restriction was also increased. A special provision of automatic approval was introduced by RBI (Reserve Bank of India), as they were assigned the job to allow for 51 per cent equity investment. The automatic approval of 100 per cent FDI was allowed in Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

2. In terms of trade liberalization, import licensing was completely done away with. There were several changes in the rationalization of tariff which was lowered amidst numerous challenges. Exchange control was also relaxed as govt. devalued rupee by 22 per cent. Exchange rate was kept flexible to allow it get reduced or increased according to the demand of the trade.

3. Public sectors, that were running in loss was disinvested. Public sector presence was conspicuous in telecommunication, banking, and insurance. First on December, 1999, the Indian Parliament passed the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority Bill (IRDA). This opened the door to private/foreign entry in the insurance sector. For the banking sector, 74 per cent FDI was allowed in private banks. As per the 1997 WTO Financial Services Agreement, India committed to permitting 12 foreign bank branches annually. In 1994 a new telecommunication policy was announced. The National Telecommunications Policy allowed private owner for investment in the telecommunication sector. Again in the New Telecom Policy in 1999, FDI was allowed at 49 per cent. In internet and broadband services, 100 per cent FDI was given the permission.

4. In infrastructure up to 100 per cent FDI was permitted.

5. The Electricity Bill 2003 is another milestone in this journey to constant shrinking space for public investment, and larger share of private investment in the economy. This bill allowed the private sector entry alongside the presence of the public sector.

The result was the increase of trade and its larger contribution in the overall economy. But the industrial sector, including small and medium manufacturing was disappointed. The accumulative effect of draconian labor laws, derelict infrastructure, fiscal deficit, the paucity of power generation, and the regional disparity in growth affected the industry. Pranab Bardhan drew our attention to credit crisis which mainly affected the manufacturing industry. GDP that rose to 6-7% benchmark depended substantially on the service sector. Foreign exchange reserve recovered from its dismal and abject condition to \$ 100 billion, but the bulk of this money came from the trade and service sector. The integration of the Indian economy with the global trends helped in recuperating the economy and mends its fundamental loopholes; concurrently, Indian economy is now much vulnerable to foreign influences. The recent round of recession in the West is inevitably hurting the economy. Another major source of worry in recent time has been the inflation and the falling rate of agricultural produce. Agriculture's overall contribution in the economy decreased to now below 20 per cent of the GDP. In addition trade liberalization in the export of rice and wheat has also worsened the situation of food stock.

Therefore the 90s struck a complete break with whatever little vestiges of the Nehruvian economy was left in the political economy. But this shift was attained at a dear cost. C.P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh in a book entitled, *The Market That Failed: Neo-liberal Economic Reforms in India* provided their observations on the reasons that hampered the growth of the Indian economy in 80s. They in fact prescribed a new direction that the 80's failure can inculcate. In their view,

There were many lessons to be learnt from the 1980s experience. First, desperate liberalization, however 'limited', given the Indian economy's dimensions and its specific characteristics, growth dependent on the fiscal stimulus that government expenditure provided, rather than on an expansion of exports. Second, if such government expenditure was not accompanied by tax and other measures aimed at mobilizing additional resources, but was financed through borrowing, the excess demand in the system was bound to spill over in the form of either inflation or a current account deficit. Third, if inflation was kept under control through imports, more external borrowing to finance the resultant deficit on the current account would be inevitable. Fourth, if this process was accompanied by trade liberalization, the size of the current account deficit and the consequent level of external borrowing would be even higher, especially since there existed a large pent-up demand for foreign goods or import-intensive domestically produced goods among the upper and upper-middle classes (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2002:17-18).

But none of these factors were given any importance in 90s, when the reform was finally sanctioned and formalized. Though some economists have tried hard to show the similarity of the Nehruvian approach with July, 1991 measures, there is no gainsaying in the fact that Nehru's statist model and the recent rounds of decentralizations that essentially intended to withdraw state's intervention are two diametrically opposed routes to reach to the common goal of capital formation and capital goods production. In fact, in Manmohan Singh's speech in the parliament in 1991, this later ground of commonality with the Nehruvian model was emphasized to give reform, as some argue, a patriotic flavor. There is a whole gamut of debate that range from vociferous contestation of the reform objectives in market driven economy to its staunch and wholehearted advocacy. Economists like Jayati Ghosh, C.P.Chandrasekhar slapped those measures as an orchestration of a long drawn plot. This 'conspiracy theses' that the economy was deliberately led to that pass and then pushed to a radical reformist spree by a minority government which then bypassed parliament and other necessary institutional sanction in the representative democracy has been long doing the rounds. Moreover, the fact that all the 'technocrats' who spearheaded the makeover drive in the 90s, for example Manmohan Singh, L. K. Jha, Abid Hussain, Montek Singh Alhwalia, were present in the planning commission when decision for large scale borrowing was taken in 80s. In the absence of proper discipline the economy was allowed to move to that excruciating crisis. This line of argument has achieved more currency in the following two decades and the major question that has cropped up time and again is what the reform did for the Indian economy. Did it transform the economy and liberate it from the clutches of state-centered stagnancy, or did it render

economy precariously balanced with the international demand, and therefore eroding the fundamentals of Indian economy which had its own specificity and immediacies?

In the subsequent sections we would deal with the implications of this capital- state nexus in the form of comprador democracy for Subaltern Studies and make our point for a reformulation of Subaltern Studies to address the new domains of subordination in this current conjuncture of neo-liberal hegemony of global capital. We would first briefly discuss the emergence of Subaltern Studies in India, its trajectory in the global academia and the criticisms it has faced from various quarters. Then we would take up the question of its reformulation under these new times for re-energising the public reason/ public sphere for postcolonial justice.

Subaltern Saboteur and the Debate over Historiography

Subaltern Studies or the Subaltern Studies Collective (SSC) emerged as an academic saboteur in Indian academic historiography by challenging the dominant narratives of Indian nationalism-

whether of colonial, bourgeois national or traditional Marxist variations- which were conspicuous for their disregard for the struggles of the subaltern/popular classes. The project appeared in a specific historico-political conjuncture. It was the 'product of its time'. The radical popular protests of the 60s and 70s, especially of the peasants, the imposition of Emergency, and the highhanded response of the Indian state to the civil unrest of the times created a legitimacy crisis of the Indian state. The Indian left party's support for the oppression of the state created a mood to move beyond the categorical imperatives of traditional left. Subaltern Studies sought to provide an alternative epistemology, methodology and a new paradigm for understanding colonial history as well as contemporary times. In this Subaltern Studies Collective, however, was influenced by the social history of Hill, Habsbawm and especially of Thompson and their variation of 'history from below'. Thus, Subaltern Studies emerged with the expressive purpose of 'rectifying the elite bias' of Indian historiography which presents the history of Indian nationalism as 'a sort of spiritual biography of the Indian elite'. Ranajit Guha writes:

The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism-colonialist elitism and bourgeois nationalist elitism...Both these varieties of elitism share the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation and the development of the consciousness-nationalism-which informed this process, were exclusively or predominantly elite achievements (Guha 1997: 1).

The 'statism that manifest itself in the nationalist and Marxist discourses' denied the 'small voices of history' to be heard. Subaltern Studies attempted to foreground the masses as the agents of their own history as it sought to acknowledge 'the contribution made by the people on their own that is independently of the elite to the making and development of this nationalism'.

Subaltern Studies sought to liberate the disenfranchised voices of history and empower the masses.

Change of track: Criticism of Subaltern Studies

But there has been a clear shift in Subaltern Studies with the change of guard when Ranajit Guha retired as editor and under Partha Chatterjee and others the project moved away from the focus on subaltern classes to the critique of Western rationality and its modernizing project under colonialism and the postcolonial nation state. This shift has been succinctly captured by Sumit Sarkar, a former member of the Subaltern Studies Collective, who left the group because of this shift. He writes:

A quick count indicates that all fourteen essays in Subaltern Studies I and II had been about under privileged groups in Indian society-peasants, tribals and in one instance workers. The corresponding figure for volume VII and VII is, at most four out of twelve. Guha's preface and introductory essay in the first volume had been full of references to 'subaltern classes', evocations of Gramsci, and the use of much Marxian terminology. Today, the dominant thrust within the project- or at least the one that gets most attention-is focused on critiques of Western power-knowledge, with non-Western community consciousness as its valorized alternative (Ludden 2013:400).

There has been a clear rejection of the 'so called economics' and Marxism is discredited as another instance of Eurocentricism. However, this move is over-determined by the changes in Western academic and political discourses in post-1989 fall of Communism and the world wide disenchantment with Marxism. In the attempt to move beyond the imperative of 'writing better

Marxist histories' and to foreground the necessity of questioning western modernity/ nation-state, Subaltern Studies embraced the 'linguistic turn' and postmodernist anti-establishment discourse. The association of Gayatri Spivak, Said and other members brought Subaltern Studies close to postcolonial criticism. For this 'transformed Subaltern Studies' domination is

... conceptualized overwhelmingly in cultural discursive terms, as the power – knowledge of the post- Enlightenment West. If at all seen as embodied concretely in institutions, it tends to get identified uniquely with the modern bureaucratic nation-state: further search for specific socio-economic interconnections is felt to be unnecessarily economic redolent of traces of a now finally defeated Marxism, and hence disreputable' (Ludden 2013: 402).

Thus, when subordination is viewed as merely cultural and discursive, insubordination can only be cultural and cultural difference came to be celebrated as the new autonomous zone. Community consciousness is thus pitted against western rationality, the celebration of the fragments as opposed to the nation–state, the arbiter of enlightenment rationality. Thus, there is the move to re-write history from the grounds of difference. The shift from capitalist colonial exploitation to enlightenment rationality leads to authentically indigenous past or fragmented present. This culturalism or prioritization of the value culture and psychoanalysis

as opposed to the material culture of the people and social analysis does not take the emancipatory project of Subaltern Studies far as it ignores the analysis of the material conditionalities of subordination and devising ways for change. In his book, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* Vivek Chibber advances a Marxist critique of Subaltern studies and accuses Subaltern Studies of perpetuating the 'orientalistic paradigm' of the east as unique 'other' which cannot be analysed by western epistemic and analytical optics. Critically analyzing the works of the main authors of Subaltern Studies Collective, Chibber points out that Subaltern Studies lost a unique opportunity of advancing an emancipatory political agenda by discarding the class analysis and embracing 'culturalism' as its epistemic and political concern.

Re-theorising Subaltern Studies and the Neo-Subaltern: A Materialist Critique for Postcolonial Justice

What is the way out of this culturalism? What new projects Subaltern Studies can take up to resuscitate its originary political agenda? Can or should Subaltern Studies engage with Marxian conceptual categories such as economic interpretation and class analysis? Our proposition is that Subaltern Studies needs to address the newer forms of subordination and material inequalities under the neo-liberal policy regime. In the post-90s there has been, as we have discussed earlier, a massive re-structuring of Indian economy. The 'license raj' is replaced by the deregulation, trade liberalization and financial sector reforms and privatization. There has been the rise to hegemony of the international finance capital through this globalization. The priority to attract investment and to capture capital flight led to a race among states for attracting capital via concession. The consequences of this are captured brilliantly by Prabhat Patnaik:

The essence of these changes lies in a reduction in the strength of the workers and peasants. The fact that state policy tends to focus on appeasing finance capital entails a withdrawal of the state from its role in supporting and protecting petty production against the onslaughts of big capital. This exposes petty producers (such as peasants, craftsmen, fishermen and artisans), and also petty traders to a process of expropriation. Such expropriation occurs both through a direct take over by big capital of their assets, like land, at a throw away prices, and also through a reduction in their "flow" incomes, and hence their capacity to survive, i.e. to carry on with "simple reproduction". The dispossessed petty producers throng urban areas in search of work, adding to the number of jobseekers (EPW April 12, 2014:39).

So, what we see is that primitive accumulation under neo-liberal regime has taken various forms, such as-

1. Land grab- there has been massive expropriation of land and natural resources by finance capital. Primitive accumulation has encroached on the 'new commons' i.e. forests,

minerals, fisheries, sand, ground water etc. The creation of new enclosures such as SEZ by the foreign and domestic corporate investors is massive source of capital accumulation.

2. The blatant disregard of the institutional and legal safeguards in dismantling the tribals from their mineral rich habitat /habitus is another testimony of unabashed postcolonial accumulation of capital.

3. The mode of postcolonial development in its neo-liberal avatar has sharply divided the urban and rural India- sometimes referred to as two Indias, India of light and India of darkness. While affluent mega cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore, Chennai, and Nagpur are browbeating for their economic growth, a careful analysis will make it clear that it's the flow of the casual labour from other underdeveloped states of India that functions as the catalyst behind their massive change. The subhuman conditions under which these migrants are often forced to work mock the sloganeering of 'shining India'.

4. The 'jobless growth' of Indian economy has created a huge sector of self-employed worker. There is also the casualisation of worker under this neo-liberal growth story. The job cuts, wage deflation and eviction of slum dwellers for city planning and urban development are some of the interconnected areas of Primitive Accumulation in contemporary India.

However, these newer forms of subordination and experience of subalternity have led to antagonistic protest movements. These include the protests against the land grabs for SEZ as the anti-Posco movement in Orissa, the movement against TATA plant in Singur, West Bengal, the protest against the seizure of mineral rich tribal lands in Chattishgarh, social movements against large scale displacement by various infrastructural as well as other projects such as hydro power projects, worker protests such as Maruti workers' protest, agitation by slum dwellers against eviction, opposition by retailers against shopping malls. These protests have been of two types- within the legal constitutional norms such as petitioning and demonstrations as well as violent protests against the state such as the Maoist insurgency in Chattishgarh and other parts of India. The Govt. response to these violent protests have resulted in counter insurgency operations such as Operation Green Hunt, often backed by private vigilante force like Salwa Judum.

What implications do these newer forms of subordination and antagonism hold for Subaltern Studies? In a recent article in EPW, "After Subaltern studies", Partha Chatterjee talked about 'new projects' to address the questions raised by Subaltern Studies which he thinks are still relevant. He points out the need for new concepts and methodologies for the 'new times'. However, the new areas he locates as possible fields of engagement are popular culture, history by visual sources such as calendar art, a turn towards ethnography-towards the 'practical, the everyday the local', etc. These proposed sites, though important for their own reason, does not take us beyond the culturalism by which Subaltern Studies has come to be characterized and are inadequate to address the question of the new subalterns of contemporary neo-liberal capital. Our argument is that Subaltern Studies needs to re-engage with the material conditions of subordination of the neo-subalterns of global capital to re-

energise the subaltern/democratic politics of counter narrative of resistance, something we seldom can see under neo-liberal postcolonial capitalism. Subaltern Studies emerged as a voice of justice by re-orienting the academic / public discourse towards the subjugated and unheard voices of history. The contemporary public discourse/ public sphere is pre-occupied with the buzzword of aspirational India that panders to the middle class and the corporate lobby. In all these narratives of India shining, there is no mention for the neo-subalterns of this 'new India'. Subaltern Studies thus needs to respond to this call by re-energising the debate over public reason by including these subaltern voices for a just and fair republic.

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