

Theory of Social Movements: Theory *for* Social Movements?

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Activists sometimes argue that sociological theories of social movements are mere academic parasitism and that what is needed, if theory is needed at all, is theory *for* social movements, theory fashioned by people committed to social movements and designed to be useful to movement activists rather than to further the careers of theorists. There is, however, no inherent conflict between an interest in understanding the world and a determination to change it; it is merely that whereas theory may be comfortably remote from action, action which is not informed by theoretical understanding will often be counterproductive. The problem for the activist is to decide which of the variety of available theories is most likely to sustain effective action. The type of theory that has given theory a bad name with activists is, in general, theory that is as unhelpful to social scientific understanding as it is to action. But there are other theories, other *kinds* of theory, that are more useful on both counts.

Is theory necessary?

Theorists tend, understandably, to believe in the utility of theory. They are, for the most part, true children of the Enlightenment: they believe in Reason and, believing in Reason, they believe that theoretical knowledge is the precondition of effective action to achieve desired results. Accordingly, theory has generally been the justification of formal political organisation.

Activists have usually been impatient with theory and suspicious of theorists. Explicitly or implicitly, theorists lay claim to power on the basis of their superior command of theoretical knowledge, knowledge they have often themselves created. Not surprisingly, activists often suspect that theorists have created theoretical knowledge partly or wholly in order to bolster their own claims to power. In any event, the effect of giving prominence to theory is to give power to theorists and to others with intellectual skills necessary to the interpretation of theory. At the very least, a movement which gives a high priority to theory is almost bound to be stratified between the highly educated few and the less well educated many. If the theory which guides the movement is elaborate and complex, movement organisations are likely to be formal, hierarchical and bureaucratic simply in order systematically to inhibit error, error, that is, in the form of action inconsistent with theoretical prescription.¹

But does such formal organisation best serve the interests of those whose lives the movement exists to change? Some recent work on social movements in the United States suggests that it does not. Indeed it has been suggested that those people who have most need of political action to alleviate their condition and least likelihood of achieving results by conventional political means are also ill-served by formally

organised political movements. Thus Piven and Cloward (1979) concluded, on the basis of their study of poor people's movements in the United States, that, for the poorest sections of the population, the costs of formal organisation were insupportably high. Where poor people's movements *were* formally organised, all available energy and resources tended to be channelled into sustaining the organisation rather than into the effective pursuit of its ostensible objectives. Poor people appeared to achieve most where they took the less predictable path of spontaneous protest and riot rather than the more calculated one of a campaign.²

Piven and Cloward drew from their findings the implication that poor people would do better to avoid organisation (and the intellectuals and theorists who promote and often staff movement organisations) and to rely upon their own powers of spontaneous and sporadic protest. That way the poor would be spared the burdens of futile attempts to organise themselves or to be organised, they would avoid the dangers of being dominated by theorists, and they might yet achieve by spontaneous protest whatever they were ever destined to gain.

Theory, action and structure

The argument is similar to the 'structural' theory of revolution popularised by Theda Skocpol. Skocpol (1979) argued, on the basis of a comparative study of the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions, that revolutions are not made by revolutionary theorists or by dedicated bands of revolutionaries, but rather they are the outcomes of complex interactions between social and political structural conditions. In Wendell Phillip's words, 'Revolutions are not made; they come'. Other students of modern revolutions have, however, come to rather different conclusions. John Dunn (1972), for example, without denying the importance of structural conditions to the creation of revolutionary situations, quite reasonably insists that successful twentieth century revolutions cannot be understood except as complex performances by imaginative and committed actors. Just possibly, revolutionary actions may create revolutionary situations out of unpromising structural conditions; more certainly, structural conditions may provide revolutionary opportunities which go begging for want of suitably talented and energetic actors. Moreover, each successful revolution changes the political repertoire available to all revolutionaries who come after it. In sum, the record of the twentieth century tends to confirm the Leninist theory of revolution as a triumph of political will and organisation rather than the Marxist one which sees revolutions as the dark deliveries of historical necessity and social structural conditions.

It must, therefore, be doubted whether it is safe to generalise from Piven and Cloward's conclusions about the experience of poor people's movements in the United States. It needs to be remembered that their study covered a limited period of history in just one country. At the very least it must be considered whether the pattern they found is a product of the peculiarities of United States political culture; Castells' account (1977, ch. 14) of urban protests in Paris came to the contrary conclusion that unruly protests were unsuccessful and that the most orderly were the most productive of desired results.³ The decentralised political system of the United States provides many openings for political access but imposes severe institutionalised limitations on effective policy implementation. This, together with a political culture dominated by the ideology of democratic pluralism, generates grievances, legitimises their

expression, and relatively easily (if incompletely and often ineffectively) accedes to protestors' demands. Strongly centralised states with fewer points of access and more effective mechanisms of policy implementation may be more resistant to disorderly protests but more hospitable to more institutionalised forms of participation by the poor. Certainly, Western European countries have generally been more accommodative to trade union organisation and have presented fewer obstacles to voter registration or voting itself than have many of the United States. The costs of political organisation to the poor in relation to the benefits derived from it have, as a result, generally been lower in Western Europe and Australasia than they have in the United States.

The changing conditions of success

It would, however, be wrong to imagine that such patterns are permanently fixed. States change and political climates change more often and more abruptly. What was true of a country in one year or decade may be much less true in another. Indeed, there is abundant evidence that it is the political will of the authorities, a factor much more temporally variable than a country's political institutional structure or political culture, that is the key factor in determining the success or otherwise of mass protests: the United States which, during the Democratic administrations of the 1960s, had been relatively responsive even to violent protests, became, in the later years of Nixon's presidency, altogether more resistant (Castells, 1978: 149; Jenkins, 1981); in Spain protests were rigorously repressed in the 1950s and 1960s but, by the mid 1970s, were tolerated, chiefly because modernising technocrats were progressively displacing hard-line Falangists in government (Castells, 1983); in central and eastern Europe, protest movements scarcely imaginable at the beginning of the 1980s were by the end of the decade transforming political culture and promising the transformation of political institutions.

A strategy effective in one place and at one time may be relatively ineffective or even counterproductive in another place or at another time. This should encourage us to be cautious in any generalisations about the utility for social movements of violence, of formal organisation or, indeed, of theory.

The usefulness of theory

Nevertheless it is rather more than mere rationalist superstition to believe that appropriately reflective, calculated action, based on sound knowledge of the situation and an appreciation of the likely consequences of possible alternative forms of action, will, other things being equal, usually produce better results than action which is entirely unreflective. On balance, it is most likely that the costs of action will be minimised and the benefits maximised if action is strategic. Strategy, of course, is necessarily based on knowledge and all knowledge is rooted in and laden with theory. It follows that theory may be useful to movements and not merely to their more personally ambitious members.

Activists who imagine that the action they take is entirely spontaneous and therefore safe from the corrupting influence of theory and theorists delude themselves. The social scientific study of riots has amply demonstrated that even in the most anarchic protest there are 'leaders' who retain a consciousness of themselves apart

from the action and who are, for that reason, capable of calculating and ‘directing’ action. These ‘leaders’ who may well be ‘leaders’ in only a single protest event, as well as the ‘opinion leaders’ who mould opinion in all kinds of communities, operate on the basis of understandings of the situation that depend upon knowledge which is itself shaped by theory. That theory may be – indeed, usually is – inchoate: it is not usually formalised as theory, but theory it is nonetheless. A major purpose of the social theorist is to make explicit and to subject to critical scrutiny theories that are otherwise unreflective and unreflected upon. Such theories may be powerful but they may also contain unconsidered contradictions and inconsistencies which, when acted upon, may ultimately have consequences quite different from those which were desired and intended. Much apparently pathological political action is in fact the product of pathologies of theory. The exposure of such pathologies is, accordingly, a useful service which social scientific analysis might render to social movements.

What kind of theory?

But *what* theory, indeed, what *kinds* of theory are likely to be most useful to social movements? If precedent and, in particular, the perennial appeal of marxism, is any guide, it is theory at its grandest, theory that purports to explain the causes and direction of social change, that has greatest appeal to activists. For many theorists, too, such theory is the summit of ambition, the standard by which all else is measured and found wanting. Their striving for all-encompassing systematic theory is understandable, even admirable, even though it is often coloured by the vanity, conceit and snobbery that attends intellectual elitism. Yet none of these attempts to construct a total theoretical system has been entirely successful and all, to the extent that they have been adopted, have produced, in the second generation if not in the master theorists themselves, closed intellectual systems more often characterised by dogmatism than by creative reinterpretation and adaptation to changing circumstances. Where they have been taken as guides to practice, they have generally led to authoritarian, sometimes even totalitarian, regimes.

Activists and theorists alike tend to have too grand and exclusive a conception of theory. Not all social theory is grand theory. Indeed, what Robert Merton (1957) recommended to sociologists as an escape from the paralysing impasse of the confrontation between marxism and functionalism is no less good advice for social movement activists: focus attention instead upon theories of the middle range.

Most theories of or about social movements are, in fact, middle-range theories: they may have connections with larger theoretical and conceptual systems and certainly they have connections with middle-range theories of other social phenomena, but they are usually developed and can often be employed as means of understanding aspects of social movements and their milieux without presupposing the existence of any all-encompassing theory of social and political change. Most recently-produced middle-range theory of social movements is not especially abstract and can be translated into terms intelligible to intelligent lay persons including, especially, social movement activists themselves. Accordingly, it has the considerable advantage for popular, democratic social movements that, unlike grand theory, it does not require the elevation or importation of a virtual priesthood of intellectuals to act as translators and guides.

A general theory of social movements? The work of Alain Touraine

Amongst recent contributions to the theory of social movements, the one that has the highest aspirations to being a general theory of social and political change is also the one that makes the strongest claims to be useful to social movements themselves. I refer to the work of Alain Touraine, the most general, programmatic statement of which appeared in English as *The Voice and the Eye* (1981). His project demonstrates many of the pitfalls of such grand ambition.⁴

Touraine's sociology and his approach to the theory of social movements has immediate appeal because of the centrality it assigns to the problem of action. Touraine conceives of society not as a set of institutions so much as a complex web of social relationships. The central task of sociology is, accordingly, the elucidation of the social action by which such relationships are produced and transformed. The sociology of action which Touraine proposes is opposed both to functionalism and to marxist economism; neither functionalism (which assigns centrality to the problem of order and interprets all social action in terms of norms and roles) nor structuralist marxism (which sees action as the working out of economic laws) copes adequately with the analysis of social action. Yet, Touraine believes, we have arrived at a great turning point in social development: the emergence from the shell of industrial society of a new 'programmed' society in which the centrality of manufacture is supplanted by the generation and deployment of knowledge.

Touraine's aim is no less than to do for the 'programmed' society of the late twentieth century, what Karl Marx had attempted to do for industrial society more than a century earlier: to expose the dynamics of societal development and to identify the emergent social movement capable of transcending the contradictions of existing social formations and ushering in a new epoch in which men and women may actively and deliberately create their own history. What most strongly distinguishes Touraine's theory from marxism is that, although he has clearly been influenced by historical materialism, his theory is concerned less with the location of structural shifts than with 'the reconstruction of frameworks of action and identity which may evolve during social conflict' (Eyerman, 1984: 80). It is a corollary of this that theory is not accorded cognitive privilege over the perspectives of rank-and-file activists. Touraine's theory proposes no immanent laws of development, nor does it prescribe correct modes of action.

There is, to put it mildly, a tension between the modesty of such programmatic statements and Touraine's claim to have identified an epochal historical transition from industrial society to a post-industrial 'programmed' society, as well as his assertion that there can be but one transformative social movement at any stage of societal development. The succession of studies of French protest movements undertaken by Touraine and his research group amounts to a quite explicit quest for the protest which contains within itself the embryo of the universal social movement which will open the way to the future. In other words, the researchers are not mere disinterested scholars but believers in search of the prophetic movement which might perform the miracle of salvation that they have ordained for it.

Although Touraine insists that in studying social movements he and his colleagues are analysts rather than activists, their method ensures that their higher

purpose is not concealed from their subjects. The method Touraine advocates and has practised is that of a ‘sociological intervention’. In the course of such an intervention the sociologist assembles a group of rank-and-file activists representing a diversity of viewpoints within a protest movement, introduces it to ‘interlocutors’ (critics and opponents who, in discussion of the movement with its activists, enhance the activists’ self-awareness by helping them to see themselves as others see them), records the group’s own discussion, confronts it with the record of its interactions, seeks to promote the group’s own self-analysis and, finally, encourages the group to accept its own ‘conversion’ by conceiving of its struggle at its highest level of generality – the level of the transformative movement which the analyst believes, on the basis of Touraine’s theory, to be necessary to fulfil the potential for social change present in prevailing social conflicts.

Many activists and the groups to which they belong would undoubtedly benefit from the process of systematic discussion, reflection and confrontation with different viewpoints which Touraine’s method employs. Many would certainly benefit from the intervention of a skilled and knowledgeable analyst. Nevertheless it seems at best naïve to suppose that such a process does not put the analyst in a privileged position with respect to the activists, and it is implausible to claim that the analyst who, overtly or covertly, brings Touraine’s theory to the group does not pretend to at least some measure of cognitive privilege.

The practice Touraine recommends to the sociologist is in some ways analogous to that of the psychoanalyst: the sociologist, in undertaking a sociological intervention, seeks to assist the optimal self-actualisation of the group much as the psychoanalyst seeks to promote the self-actualisation of the individual. However much (or little) the psychoanalyst succeeds in helping the individual, it would be absurd to claim that the analyst did not assume a position of cognitive privilege, not because of his or her desire to dominate the patient but simply because it is the analyst (and not the patient) who has learned and deploys the theory and the techniques of analysis. Indeed, very often the success of the analysis is determined by how fully the patient adopts the theoretical world-view of the analyst.

Touraine and his colleagues seem scarcely more circumspect in their enthusiasm to achieve the ‘conversion’ of the groups with which they intervene. One does not need to doubt Touraine’s integrity or even the utility of his method for activists themselves, to remain sceptical of his claim that his method entails no presumption of the cognitive privilege of the theorist. Even without intending to impose theory upon the activists, the method of sociological intervention, especially where it is conducted by a theorist of Touraine’s established eminence and widely published views, appears inevitably to entail an asymmetrical power relationship which many activists will understandably resent. At its worst, in less scrupulous hands, it might provide the rationale for a new version of intellectual bolshevism.

Most recent theorising about social movements is both more modest in its intellectual ambition and more circumspect in its relations with social movement practice. To that extent it is content to be theory *of* social movements and to leave the question of whether it is actually useful *for* social movements to the activists themselves. Nevertheless, many, perhaps most, social movement theorists are or have

been social movement activists and their theorising bears the marks of their affective involvement with movements

Resource mobilisation Theory

Perhaps the most widely employed approach to the study of social movements today, at least in the English-speaking world, is what has come to be called 'resource mobilisation theory'.⁵ At its most general, this theory starts from the very straightforward observation that all political action is socially structured and that the resources available to activists are patterned accordingly. It makes the assumption that movement activists are at least as calculatively rational as are more conventional political actors and that they will, accordingly, devise strategies of action which make best use of the resources they have and which minimise the requirement for resources they do not have.⁶

This stress on the instrumental rationality of social movements has been criticised for exaggerating the 'normality' of social movements and neglecting the extent to which they are extraordinary, oppositional and even utopian; many movements seek, after all, not merely to operate effectively within the parameters of the existing political system but to extend or even to overthrow those parameters. The fact that so much emphasis has been placed on the instrumental rationality of social movements is both an intellectual reaction against a previous generation of theory which regarded social movements as essentially non-rational instances of 'collective behaviour' and a political reaction to the dismissal of social movements as irrational and so irrelevant to, or subversive of, legitimate democratic politics. To that extent, resource mobilisation theory too has been theory both of and for social movements.

Much of the early work on resource mobilisation theory focussed on questions of organisation and leadership. It was criticised for being overly concerned with processes internal to social movements themselves and for neglecting factors arguably more crucial to the success or even survival of social movements – the actions and reactions of other, more powerful political actors among which the state itself is the most important. More recently, attention has shifted to the interaction between social movements and political systems, and the term 'political opportunity structures'⁷ has increasingly been employed as a short-hand for the range of political factors, conjunctural as well as institutional, which bear on the development and outcomes of social movements.

Thus attention has been focussed upon: the degree of openness of political systems to access by non-elite actors, new political movements or new parties; the degree of effectiveness of political systems in decision-making and the implementation of decisions; and, latterly, more strictly conjunctural factors such as the prevailing state of political competition within a polity. A number of studies have demonstrated the importance of these considerations to the development and outcomes of movements as diverse as anti-nuclear movements (Kitschelt, 1986), student movements (Rootes, 1990) and environmentalism (Rootes, 1992).

Resource mobilisation theory, then, focusses upon the patterning of resources for action and of opportunities for and constraints upon successful action, emphasises the problem of organisation, and stresses the calculative rationality of movements. It

is resolutely focussed upon *how* it is that movements are organised and succeed or fail rather than *why* they exist at all. As theory for the classroom, this is a serious limitation but it in no way compromises the utility of resource mobilisation theory for movements themselves; even revolutionary movements need to be calculative, to make best use of their resources and opportunities.

If resource mobilisation theory often seems to be no more than a formalisation of strategic common sense, it may yet serve as a reminder to veteran activists and as a surrogate for direct experience for those who are new to the politics of social movements. For movement activists, then, resource mobilisation theory has at least modest pedagogic value and, because of its modesty, it is both relatively free of ideological freight and presents little risk of legitimating the domination of the theorist as expert.

Knowledge and Social movements

If much attention has been paid to the way social situations structure the resources available to social movements, less has been invested in elucidating the way knowledge and perceptions are structured. Yet a major factor in social conflict is the fact that people who are differently situated in social structures see the same events differently, their vision variously clarified or obscured by perspectives rooted in their social situations. This structuring of knowledge and perspective affects equally movements and their opponents and it tends to exacerbate conflicts of interest because it obstructs the identification of common ground necessary to negotiation, to the optimisation of the benefits of negotiation, and to the minimisation of mutually destructive hostility (Rootes, 1983).

For activists in most movements total victory and the utter destruction of opponents is neither feasible nor attempted. What they seek by their action is to improve their leverage and bargaining position in order that the outcome of negotiation and compromise may be most favourable to their constituencies. If they are to achieve such optimal results, activists need to develop the ability to see the situation from the perspective of their opponents in order to avoid action which will increase resistance rather than weaken it. An understanding of the rudiments of the sociology of knowledge may accordingly be as useful to movement activists as it is to conciliators.

Another development of the sociology of knowledge as applied to social movements is perhaps more indigestible for movements. Bouchier (1978) has shown how different political ideas and principles or political 'ideologies' serve movements more or less well in the pursuit of effectiveness. Radical movements must, if they are to be successful in attracting and retaining commitment, accomplish the processes of de-legitimation (the identification of areas of stress and the attack upon the legitimating mechanisms associated therewith), dis-alienation (the presentation of an alternative cognitive universe and an explanation of the means by which desired changes might be produced) and commutation (the communication to an audience of a realistic alternative interpretation of the world sufficiently flexible to encompass changing circumstances). The management of these processes is a task for theory itself and the success or failure of a movement may in large measure be attributed to the properties of the political theory it embraces.

Such an approach is a useful addition to the armoury of the academic analyst of social movements but it is less obviously useful to movements themselves since, even where its truth is accepted, acting on it involves tinkering with political theories close to the heart of the movement's reason for existing. Nevertheless movements can revise their political theories and some do: Levitas (1977), for instance, has documented the way the Christian Socialist movement redefined its goals in response to changing conditions.

It is obviously difficult for activists to amend or abandon theories central to a movement's identity but it should be possible to distinguish the central elements of theory from those which are more peripheral, just as strategy may be distinguished from tactics. Peripheral elements of theory, like tactics, might then be retained or jettisoned according to their utility in contributing to the achievement of movement goals.

Theorists and activists

Relations between those who are active in social and political movements and those who write about them have always been awkward. To some extent this merely reflects the tension between those whose personal taste is for action and those who are most given to reflection but it is, ultimately, rooted in the nature of theory and theorising. The awkwardness is bound to remain because, ultimately, the purposes of theory and of activism are different: whereas theory is the attempt to understand the world, activism is the attempt to change it.

Theorising requires a degree of detachment from action and that detachment often feeds the suspicion by activists, especially those in movements whose rationale is popular and democratic, that theorists are arrogant and elitist. As a result, movement activists are sometimes tempted to reject theorists and theory alike, especially when the theorists come from and frequently retreat to what are still imagined to be the ivory towers of academe. There, it seems, theorists fashion careers that are in large part parasitic upon the lives of movement activists.

Theory is necessarily produced by elites – but that is not to say that theory is necessarily elitist, that it can only be appropriated by elites, or that its employment can only lead to elitist results. Certainly, there is the danger that theorists will seek to set themselves up as experts and that they will use their mastery of theory to assert their right to make decisions for others in the movement. There is the corresponding danger that others in the movement will be excessively deferential to theorists and so encourage the development of an intellectual vanguardism which leads ultimately to despotism, whether of theorists or, more usually, of opportunists who assume the legitimacy mantle of theory. There is a fine balance to be struck between deference to theorists and (a usually) damaging scorn for all theory.

Activists may more gladly suffer theorists if they believe them to be sympathetic to the struggle. That is entirely understandable especially in view of the fact that much bad or, from the point of view of activists, unhelpful theory has come from the pens of writers motivated by hostility to movements which they saw as a form of political action menacing to liberal democracy.

Many present-day theorists of social movements are sympathetic to the movements they study but it would be a mistake to attribute recent advances in the theory of social movements entirely to that sympathy; it is not necessarily the case that better theory of social movements is constructed by theorists with strong pro-movement sympathies. Opponents have just as strong an interest as sympathisers in correctly understanding a movement, and sympathy is as likely as hostility to distort the perspective and compromise the judgement of the theorist or analyst. Just as those hostile to movements are indefatigable in their search for damning evidence, so researchers sympathetic to movements will seek to portray the movement in a favourable light and may even suppress inconvenient truths. Not only does this compromise their status as social scientists but, in the long run, it may not serve the movement well either. A myth or even a lie may sometimes inspire or sustain a movement (for example, the belief that the movement is stronger and its opponents weaker than in fact they are), but more often movement activists need clear-headed knowledge of their movement and its opponents. Such knowledge may sometimes discourage them from audacious action which may have had an outside chance of success but it will more often protect the movement from the disastrous consequences of misdirected effort.

Movement activists should not, therefore, be too quick to demand that theorists of social movements declare and demonstrate their sympathy for the movements they study. The greatest service theory can render to social movements is to attempt to present the unvarnished truth in language accessible to the intelligent lay person. Good theory is no panacea but it is better suited than ignorance or wishful thinking to enabling activists better to understand the nature of their action, the obstacles to it and the positions of their adversaries. It is in this way that theory *of* social movements, even without being theory *for* social movements, may yet be useful *to* social movements.

Notes

1. The Communist movement is a case in point: its bureaucratism stemmed, ultimately, from the centrality to the movement of an elaborate, formal theory – marxism-leninism.
2. Piven and Cloward's finding is consistent with Gamson's (1975) conclusion that, even among formally organised protest movements in the United States, it was the most unruly which were the most successful. It should, however, be noted that others who have examined Gamson's data have come to rather different conclusions.
3. It must be said that the more obvious reason for the lack of success of unruly protests in Paris – indeed, for the recourse to unruly protest at all – was the social profile of the protesters: the most unruly and least successful were the socially marginal immigrants, students and single people. More 'respectable' and better socially integrated people were more restrained (perhaps because they were more constrained?) and more successful. It should, however, be noted that no urban protests in Paris were more than very modestly successful; the structure of government and the attitudes of officials – dimensions of the political institutions

- and culture of a country – appear to be important factors in determining the success or otherwise of protest movements. (See Castells (1978), ch. 6).
4. Eyerman (1982, 1984) and Hannigan (1985) offer accounts of Touraine's project and situate it in the context of other theories of social movements. See also Pakulski (1990), ch. 1. Probably the most systematic critical appreciation in English of Touraine's work is Rucht (1990).
 5. The most useful overview of resource mobilisation theory is Jenkins (1983). Also Jenkins (1985).
 6. For an application of a resource mobilisation approach to the explanation of radical student movements, see Rootes (1978).
 7. The term appears first to have been used by Peter Eisinger and elaborated by Sidney Tarrow but more readily available exposition and application of it is to be found in Kitschelt (1986). To the extent that it is increasingly used to refer to processes that are more strictly conjunctural than properly structural, the term has become over-extended; to avoid linguistic and conceptual confusion it would seem better to restrict it to refer to the properties of political systems.

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