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Political Theory 2012 40: 767

DOI: 10.1177/0090591712457666

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Political Theory

40(6) 767–778

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Richard J. Bernstein¹

I

Three of the most important political thinkers of the twentieth century, Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, and John Dewey, were deeply concerned about the character and fate of political public life in the contemporary world. The public—especially the political significance of the public sphere or public space—stands at the very center of their thinking. Each feared the real possibility of what Dewey called the “eclipse of the public.” Despite their striking differences, each captures features of public life that—when we weave their insights together—results in a more textured understanding of both the real possibilities of, and threats to, political public life.

Before turning to how Arendt and Dewey complement Habermas, I want to focus on a creative tension that is at the heart of Habermas’s narrative in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas develops a dazzling complex narrative that integrates sociological, historical, political, economic, legal, and media motifs. He also illuminates how changes in family life and architecture were involved in the emergence and the eventual disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere. He traces the transformation in the meanings of public, publicity, and public opinion. “Structural transformation” (*Strukturwandel*) is perhaps too neutral a term to fully capture the critical thrust of Habermas’s narrative. He shows us how—in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries—the social, economic, and political conditions that made the bourgeois public sphere possible were “shattered” and destroyed. Publicity loses its critical function and becomes “staged display”; public opinion has degenerated into the sophisticated

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manipulation of opinion by “special interests”; and even the press—at one time the medium for public discussion—becomes a vehicle for advertising and entertainment rather than medium for rational-critical debate. Habermas’s tale can be read—not simply as transformation—but as a story of relentless decline of rational-critical discussion by private individuals in a public sphere. And yet this is not quite the whole truth; it isn’t an accurate description of what Habermas shows. There is a *normative core* in the idea of the bourgeois public sphere that, despite its transformation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is still relevant for us today. I say “today,” because even though Habermas’s book was written fifty years ago before the advent of the Internet, if anything the normative significance of (and threats to) the public sphere are even more relevant in our time.

Let us recall how Habermas characterizes the bourgeois public sphere as it emerged in the early eighteenth century. During the time when there was a growing separation of civil society and state, a stratum of bourgeois educated people emerged where “the public concern regarding the private sphere of civil society was no longer confined to [state] authorities but was considered by the subjects as one that was properly theirs.”¹

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason (*öffentliches Raisonement*).²

“The sphere of private people” was only a relatively small stratum of literate and educated people who were the male property-owning heads of family. Habermas traces the character and sites of these public discussions that had their origins in the literary salons, coffeehouses, and the spread of pamphlets and periodicals. What began as nonpolitical literary discussion was transformed into explicit political debate. Throughout, Habermas emphasizes the “rational-critical” function of private individuals who constituted themselves as a public.³ As long as it was assumed that *citoyen* and *homme* were identical and that “the *homme* was simultaneously an owner of private property who as *citoyen* was to protect the stability of the property . . . what the public itself believed to be and to be doing was ideology and simultaneously more than mere ideology.”⁴ This is a crucial point in Habermas’s argument. The self-understanding of the bourgeois public sphere

was ideological because it presupposed the identification of the property-owning *citoyen* and the *homme*. But it was more than a “mere ideology” because “the dominant class nevertheless developed political institutions which credibly embodied as their objective meaning the idea of their own abolition.”⁵ Habermas carefully traces how the self-interpretation of the bourgeois public sphere crystallized in the idea of “public opinion” and received a classic formulation in the Kantian idea of right. But he also follows how this “classic formulation” was criticized by Hegel—and especially by Marx. “Marx denounced public opinion as false consciousness: it hid before itself its own true character as a mask of bourgeois class interests.”⁶ “The public sphere with which Marx saw himself confronted contradicted its own principle of universal accessibility. . . . Similarly, the equation of ‘property owners’ with ‘human beings’ was untenable.”⁷ “The bourgeois constitutional state, along with the public sphere as the central principle of organization, was mere ideology. The separation of the private from the public realm obstructed at this stage of capitalism *what the idea of the bourgeois public sphere promised* [emphasis added].”⁸

We can detect here the double function that the bourgeois public sphere plays in Habermas’s narrative. Although acknowledging its ideological function insofar as it identifies male property-owning citizens with human beings, Habermas, nevertheless, is primarily concerned with what the idea of the bourgeois public sphere *promises*—what I have called its normative core. And it becomes increasingly evident that what Habermas takes to be the normative core of the idea of the bourgeois public sphere is the standard by which he evaluates the degeneration of the public sphere and the debasement of the concepts of public opinion and the principle of publicity.

What was the meaning of public opinion and publicity in the idea (or more accurately, the idealized self-understanding) of the bourgeois public sphere? Habermas sketches how the common understanding of “opinion” as a judgment that lacks certainty or opinion “as a basically suspicious repute among the multitude” was transformed into *opinion publique*.⁹ *Opinion publique* takes on the “meaning of an opinion purified through critical discussion in the public sphere to constitute a true opinion.”¹⁰ There is a “rationality claimed by public opinion.”¹¹ The normative force of this idea of public opinion becomes sharply defined when we contrast it with what “public opinion” has become in our time. Habermas argues that there has been “the social-psychological liquidation” of public opinion. The purpose of developing empirical techniques for studying “public opinion” today is frequently motivated by the desire to *manipulate* it.

We find a similar transformation and degeneration of the meaning and concept of “publicity.” In German-speaking areas, even before “public opinion”

became established as a standard phrase, the “idea of the bourgeois public sphere attained its theoretically fully developed form with Kant’s elaboration of the principle of publicity in his philosophy of right and his philosophy of history.”¹² But enlightenment must be mediated by the public sphere and incorporate the principle of publicity. Even though Kant restricted citizenship to those who owned property, the principle of publicity has a *normative* force that transcends “the conflation of *bourgeois* and *homme*, of self-interested, property-owning private people and autonomous individuals per se.”¹³ What has publicity become in our time? It has lost its critical function “in favor of staged display; even arguments are transmuted into symbols to which again one cannot respond by arguing but only by identifying with them.”¹⁴ Habermas’s critique of the transformation of the principle of publicity is quite damning. (And frankly if one reflects on the current state of politics, especially in the United States, the situation seems much worse than it was fifty years ago.)

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that Habermas’s narrative is one of decline, degeneration, and the almost total obliteration of the normative core of the idea of the bourgeois public sphere. But I want to return to what I called the creative tension that stands at the heart of Habermas’s narrative. Does it make any sense to speak today of “reinstating the public sphere in its original function”?¹⁵ Certainly not *if* this is taken to mean a return to the social, political, and economic conditions of its emergence in the eighteenth century. But this is not quite where Habermas leaves us. “Even today,” he states “the constitution of the welfare-state mass democracy binds the activity of the organs of the state to publicity that a permanent process of opinion and consensus formation can be influential at least as a freedom-guaranteeing corrective to the exercise of power and domination.”¹⁶ Habermas clearly holds out the possibility that even under the changed circumstances of contemporary capitalism, there is the possibility of a revitalization of the public sphere. He discerns the conflicting tendencies in the contemporary world. On the one hand, there is the tendency toward “*staged and manipulative* publicity.”¹⁷ On the other hand, to the degree that the social-welfare state “preserves the continuity with the liberal constitutional state,” it “clings to the mandate of a political public sphere according to which the public is set in motion a critical process of public communication through the very organizations that mediatize it.”¹⁸

2

When Habermas wrote *The Structural Transformation*, he was acquainted with the writings of Hannah Arendt, especially *The Human Condition*. But the work that is far more relevant to Habermas’s understanding of the

bourgeois public sphere is Arendt's *On Revolution*, which appeared in 1963. Arendt, especially in her discussion of the American Revolution, highlights many of the features of the political public sphere that Habermas underscores. The striking similarities (and differences) between them can further refine our understanding of the normative core of the bourgeois public sphere.¹⁹ Arendt, like Habermas, is deeply concerned about the transformation, the distortion and the threatened disappearance of political public sphere in the contemporary world. Unlike Habermas who seeks to develop a detailed historical and sociological narrative of the emergence, character, and transformation of the bourgeois public sphere, Arendt's approach, especially in *The Human Condition*, is much more global. Her grand narrative is one of the emergence of the social in the modern age and the way in which it overwhelms the classical distinction between the private and the public. But for all her skepticism about transformation of politics into administration in the modern age, she also claims that the history of revolutions from the eighteenth century until the present "politically spells the innermost story of the modern age."²⁰ Arendt sharply distinguishes revolutions (and the revolutionary spirit) from rebellions. The end of rebellion is liberation from oppression, but "the end of revolution is the foundation of freedom."²¹ According to Arendt, the emergence of the revolutionary spirit in the eighteenth century *presupposed* and indeed grew out of the bourgeois public sphere. This public sphere is a manifestation of tangible public freedom—the freedom that appears when there is mutual debate, deliberation, and action among peers. When Arendt speaks of the American Revolution, she refers primarily to the public discussions and debates that *culminated* in the writing and ratification of the Constitution. Arendt, like Habermas is fully aware that public sphere was limited to an educated elite group of male property owners—many of whom owned slaves. But like Habermas, she seeks to discern the normative core of this public sphere. She also sees the creation of the public space by private individuals as one in which there is the public exchange and reasonable debate about opinions. The public debate in the American colonies was originally about the restoration of "ancient liberties" and "the rights of Englishman"—a confrontation with the British monarchy. But this public discourse eventually turned into the demand for the revolutionary creation of a *novus ordo saeculorum*. Like Habermas, Arendt too notes the disparity between the idea (or ideal) of this public sphere and its historical actuality. But the *ideal* of public space presupposes an equality of peers—what Arendt calls "isonomy"—at least among those who participate in such a space. Like Habermas, Arendt stresses the difference between *interest* and the formation of *opinion* in the public sphere. "Interest and opinion are entirely different

political phenomena. Politically, interests are relevant only as group interests.²² Arendt calls "opinion" what Habermas identifies as "public opinion" (*opinion publique*). "Opinions will rise wherever men communicate freely with one another and have the right to make their views public; but these views in their endless variety seem to stand also in need of purification and representation. . . . Since opinions are formed and tested in a process of exchange of opinion against opinion, their differences can be mediated only by passing them through the medium of a body of men."²³

In *The Structural Transformation*, Habermas speaks about "rational-critical debate" (*öffentliches Rasonnement*) and the public use of reason. Arendt agrees that the testing and purification of opinion involves the use of one's reason but she is wary of assimilating this purification of opinion with the procedures for determining rational or factual truth. A healthy political life depends on a *conflict* of opinions, which in turn presupposes a *plurality* of individual perspectives.

Opinions . . . never belong to groups but exclusively to individuals, who "exert their reason coolly and freely," and no multitude, be it the multitude of a part or of the whole of society, will ever be capable of forming an opinion. Opinions will rise whenever men communicate freely with one another and have the right to make their views public, but these views in their endless variety seem to stand also in need of purification and representation.²⁴

Arendt is just as relentless as Habermas in contrasting the type of *rational persuasion* of opinion formation in the bourgeois public sphere with the relatively recent phenomenon of mass manipulation of fact and opinion that has become evident in the rewriting of history and political image-making.

Concerning the public sphere, the role of publicity and *opinion publique*, we can read Habermas and Arendt as complementing and enriching each other. Arendt beautifully describes what is distinctive about the "rationality claimed by public opinion" and gives a more nuanced analysis of what Habermas calls "*öffentliches Rasonnement*." She shows that political judgment required for the formation of public opinion needs to be carefully distinguished from other forms of reasoning. Following Kant, Arendt calls this an "enlarged mentality" and this is what is required for political thinking in the public sphere. Both Habermas and Arendt are aware of the actual historical practices that characterized the bourgeois public sphere as well as the *gap* between these practices and what the idea of the bourgeois public sphere *promises*. And both seek to elucidate the normative core of the public

sphere—a normative core that serves as a basis for a *critique* of the manipulation of the public sphere in our time.

What are the prospects for a revitalized public sphere today? As I have already indicated, Habermas concludes *The Structural Transformation* by noting the “competing” tendencies is the modern social-welfare state—the tendency for undermining the political public sphere and the tendency to cling “to the mandate of a political public sphere according to which the public is to set in motion a critical process of public communication.” One strand that runs through much of Habermas’s work during the past fifty years has been a fuller explication of the normative content of the idea of the public sphere and a realistic appraisal of the threats to its actualization in our contemporary globalized world. In a very different way, Arendt also leaves us with an ambiguous message concerning the fate of the public sphere. She sees its legacy in the spontaneous bursting forth of the revolutionary spirit. These are those occasions when individuals come together and constitute themselves into a new public space. Arendt spoke about the manifestation of this revolutionary spirit in the French resistance during the Second World War and the early civil rights movement in the United States and the Budapest Revolution in 1956. I have no doubt that if she were alive today she so would have seen this revolutionary spirit—this creation of tangible public freedom—in the nonviolent movements that led to the overthrow of Communism and in the early days of the Arab spring of 2011. But Arendt leaves us with a deep perplexity. On one hand, it is in these extraordinary moments when the revolutionary spirit comes alive that the political public sphere becomes a living reality. But on the other hand, Arendt wonders whether it is possible to house and sustain this public freedom. Even in what she takes to be the “successful” American Revolution, she thinks that the “failure” of the American Revolution was not only a failure to remember what was distinctive about the revolutionary spirit but the failure to create political institutions in which it could be preserved. Arendt did propose a council system and federation of councils in which the type of public debate, formation of opinion, and publicity that she and Habermas favor might be realized—but her proposal is extremely sketchy.²⁵ She strongly opposed the idea of a world state, just as Habermas does. But she proposed, though she never systematically developed, the idea of a world federation of councils that would be an alternative to sovereign nation-states.

3

John Dewey did not attempt to analyze in detail the origins and transformation of the bourgeois public sphere, but its significance—especially in the

American context—was always in the background of his reflections on the promise and failures of democracy. The influential American journalist Walter Lippmann—in two controversial books, *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925)—provoked Dewey to deal with the problem of the eclipse of the public. Lippmann argues that any democratic theory that assumes that ordinary citizens can be well informed and debate public issues is misguided. Business and political leaders know that building a consensus is not a matter of obtaining rational agreement but rather finding the effective symbols to manipulate the “public.” “He who captures the symbols by which the public feeling is for the moment contained controls by that much the approaches of public policy.” Consent is manufactured from above, not from below. A “realistic” democracy doesn’t require an informed general public, but rather an informed elite, “disinterested” policy experts. In Habermas’s terms, Lippmann can be read as arguing that the public should *limited* to these policy experts. As for the more general voting population, their role is: “To support the Ins when things are going well, to support the Outs when they seem to be going badly, this, in spite of all that has been said about tweedledum and tweedledee, is the essence of popular government.”²⁶ Habermas might well have cited Lippmann as a source to support his claims about the degeneration of the public sphere.

Dewey believed that Lippmann’s diagnosis of the current situation (1920s) was accurate—that “the Public seems to be lost; it is certainly bewildered.” And it is bewildered because of the many factors that Habermas characterizes in *The Structural Transformation*. But Dewey not only voices his skepticism about Lippmann’s “disinterested” policy experts, he argues that Lippmann underestimates the possibility of the revitalization of public life among ordinary citizens. Dewey asserts: “There can be no public without full publicity in respect to all the consequences which concern it. Whatever obstructs and restricts publicity, limits and distorts public opinion.”²⁷ Like Habermas and Arendt, Dewey claims that “the belief that thought and its communication are now free simply because legal restrictions which once obtained have been done away with is absurd.”²⁸ His critique of what has happened to the idea of the public, publicity, and public opinion is as sharp as Habermas’s critique. But like Habermas, Dewey’s purpose is not primarily to condemn the transformation of the public sphere, publicity, and public opinion. On the contrary, he appeals to the normative core embedded in the bourgeois public sphere. The revitalization of a critical public is the very heart of political democracy. There can be no public without full publicity in respect to all consequences that concern it. Whatever obstructs or restricts publicity limits and distorts public opinion and checks and distorts thinking on social affairs. Without

freedom of expression, not even the methods of social inquiry can be developed. Dewey, like Habermas and Arendt, understood the power of the normative ideal of the public sphere. And this is one of the primary reasons why Dewey placed so much emphasis on the role of education in cultivating the critical habits required for a vital public sphere. In “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us” Dewey defended his democratic faith. Fundamental to Dewey’s democratic faith is his conviction that we now urgently need to “re-create by deliberate and determined endeavor the kind of democracy which in its origin one hundred and fifty years ago was largely the product of a fortunate contribution of men and circumstances.”²⁹ Translating this into Habermas’s terms, it means that we should not forget the *promise* implicit in the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere—“people’s public use of their reason (*öffentliches Raisonement*).” We must not forget that “publicity was, according to its very idea, a principle of democracy not just because anyone could in principle announce, with equal opportunity, his personal inclinations, wishes, and convictions—opinions; it could only be realized in the measure that these personal opinions could evolve through the rational-critical debate of a public into public opinion—*opinion publique*.”³⁰

There is another common theme that Habermas, Arendt, and Dewey share—although they draw different consequences from it. Originally the bourgeois public sphere arose in the context of the interaction of civil society and the state, but it is clear that for Habermas (as well as Arendt and Dewey), the idea of the public is “decoupled” from the idea of the nation-state. Habermas in the development of his theory of cosmopolitanism emphasizes the importance of the development of publics that transcend the nation-state. Arendt typically stresses the face-to-face contact in public spaces, but she is extremely skeptical about sovereign national states. Her “alternative” council system calls for federation—and eventually world federation of publics. As for Dewey, the very way he characterizes the public is independent of any reference to the nation-state. “Those indirectly and seriously affected for good or evil form a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name. The name selected is the Public.”³¹ Consequently, for Dewey, a public may consist of a local town meeting, but it may also encompass what he calls the “Great Community.”

Throughout I have been emphasizing what Habermas, Arendt, and Dewey share in their concern about the fate of public life. But the differences in their views should not be underestimated. I want to suggest that these differences are not to be seen as fundamental incompatibilities but rather as productive tensions. Let me illustrate what I mean. It is certainly true that Habermas emphasizes the give and take of *reasons* in public debate. His approach to the

idea of the public to stress the rationality of opinion formation. And in his early work he stressed the role of a commitment to truth in public debate. Arendt, as is well known, is skeptical about evaluating public debate by criteria of truth. More generally, she emphasizes the difference between *doxa* (opinion) and philosophical conceptions of knowledge and truth. Politics involves the type of noncognitive judgment that Kant described in the *Critique of Judgment* as reflective judgment. Arendt was critical of the tendency of philosophers to try to judge politics by the criteria that are appropriate for philosophical discourse. And she also stresses the agonistic feature of public life. For Arendt, “truth” is basically *coercive*; it is antithetical to the persuasion that she takes to be a feature of political debate. But I suggest that these basic differences between Habermas and Arendt should be read as complementing each other (rather than contradicting each other). Habermas is not always sensitive that the “rationality” that is characteristic of the public sphere must be carefully distinguished from other forms of rationality. And Arendt sometimes so emphasizes the difference between knowledge and opinion that she fails to elucidate what are (and ought to be) the criteria for evaluating competing public opinions. What is the basis for judging that one opinion is better than another? How is one to evaluate competing public arguments? Arendt does not provide adequate answers to these questions. This is why I think Habermas can serve as a corrective to Arendt and Arendt can serve as a corrective to Habermas. Public political debate is more open and varied than Habermas sometimes suggests, and it can be more open to rational evaluation than Arendt sometimes indicates.

The differences between Habermas and Dewey should also not be underestimated. Unlike Habermas, Dewey did not like to speak about rationality. He thought that philosophers tended to abuse the talk about reason and rationality. He preferred to speak about social intelligence. This is not just a linguistic preference. For Dewey, intelligence involves imagination, emotion, and commitment. He challenged the way in which philosophers tend to draw false contrasts between “reason,” “emotion,” “desire,” and “imagination” and to speak of rationality as if it were a separate and distinguishable faculty. Social intelligence consists of a complex of critical habits and inquiry. It is never simply a matter of “mere” reasoning. But once again I see here a productive tension in the differences between Habermas and Dewey. Many critics have objected that Habermas’s understanding of deliberative democracy is too “rationalistic.” I think this is a misguided criticism, but Habermas himself leaves it open in the way in which he typically speaks about *öffentliche Rasonnment*. Dewey’s more flexible and thicker conception of social intelligence helps to bring out features of public discourse that Habermas does not always sufficiently emphasize.

In concluding this paper, I am aware of the many important differences among Habermas, Arendt, and Dewey. But nevertheless, I think that concerning what I have called the normative core of the idea of the public, publicity, and public opinion—an idea that transcends any of its ideological distortions—their different approaches complement each other, even when they stress different features of public life. They are deeply aware of the threats and the tendencies that undermine and manipulate the public and public opinion. They argue that the relevance of this normative core is evaluating and *criticizing* the distortions of contemporary political public life. Even more important, they show us that the revitalization of a public sphere in which there is genuine debate and mutual participation is still not only a real concrete and urgent possibility but a task (*Aufgabe*) before us.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, [1962] 1991), 23.
2. *Ibid.*, 27.
3. The English text frequently translates “*öffentliches Rasonnement*” as “rational-critical public debate” and “*Rasonnement*” as “critical discussion.” Habermas notes: “In our [German] usage this term (i.e., *Rasonnement*) unmistakably preserves the polemical nuances of both sides: simultaneously the invocation of reason and its disdainful disparagement as merely malcontent griping” (*ibid.*, 27).
4. *Ibid.*, 87-88.
5. *Ibid.*, 86.
6. *Ibid.*, 124.
7. *Ibid.*, 124.
8. *Ibid.*, 125.
9. *Ibid.*, 89. Habermas is primarily concerned with the emergence and transformation of the bourgeois public sphere in Germany, France, and England—with occasional references to America. Michael Warner, who was influenced by Habermas, describes the emergence of the political public sphere in the American colonies in his *The Letters of the Republic*.

10. Ibid., 93.
11. Ibid., 90.
12. Ibid., 102.
13. Ibid., 111.
14. Ibid., 206.
15. Ibid., 208.
16. Ibid., 208.
17. Ibid., 232.
18. Ibid. 232.
19. Habermas explores how the literary discussions that took place in European salons were one of the sources for the emergence of the public political sphere. Hannah Arendt's *Rahel Varnhagen* (written in the 1930s but not published until the 1950s) gives a vivid portrait of the lively discussions in these salons.
20. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 3.
21. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 140.
22. Ibid., 229.
23. Ibid., 229-30.
24. Ibid., 229.
25. For her description of the "council system" see Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 265-85.
26. See Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 294-300, for the passages quoted from Lippmann and a general discussion of Lippmann's position.
27. John Dewey, "The Public and Its Problems," in *The Later Works of John Dewey 1925-1953*, vol. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008) 339.
28. Ibid., 340.
29. *The Later Works of John Dewey 1925-1953*, vol. 14 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 227.
30. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 99.
31. *The Later Works of John Dewey 1925-1953*, vol. 2, 257.

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