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Globalisation and the Commodification of Labour: Temporary Labour Migration

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Abstract

There has been a qualitative shift in the character of international labour migration with increased temporary labour migration. With circumscribed employment rights, the increased significance of temporary migrant workers underscores arguments that globalisation has engendered a more profound commodification of labour. The instrumentalist approach, especially of international financial institutions in promoting temporary labour migration as a panacea for development, reinforces this impression. Encapsulated in migration-development discourse, labour migration, like other commodities, is presented as a means of generating export revenue for the South. Karl Polanyi's critique of this market-defined construct of labour as a commodity, when labour can only ever be a fictitious commodity, provides a basis for contesting the representation of labour in the migration-development discourse. However, recourse to a Marxist method is held to be essential if we are to move beyond an appreciation of the process in order to interrogate the rationale that is driving the transformation of labour.

Introduction

There has been growing interest over the last decade in the import of international migration as an economic force that could provide renewed growth potential for the developing economies of the world. A migration-development discourse identifies the potential that has been engendered by the dramatic increase in the magnitude of officially recorded income which migrants are remitting to their home countries. Remittances afford the promise of enhancing economic wellbeing because, as has been widely argued, the increased significance of remittances provides a growing source of foreign exchange and source of capital that in many instances exceeds private international capital flows and the official development assistance to developing countries.

Underpinning this story has been the resurgence in international labour migration. Of particular significance has been the increase in the numbers of a class of migrant worker engaged in semi- and low-skilled, low-paid occupations

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and whose residence and work permit rights, let alone industrial and civil rights, are severely circumscribed. Denied permanent entry, temporary migrant workers are subject to limited periods of employment resulting from the requirement for regular renewal of contracts. The result has been a qualitative change in the character of international labour migration, and it is this category of workers who figure as the key actors in the migration-development discourse. However, while the migration-development discourse acknowledges the movement of people as the critical ingredient in spawning this new development potential, it is not the character of this new global labour force *per se* that has occupied the analytical and policy focus, but rather the movement of money. The forces that have drawn labour more systematically into the globalisation process are by and large regarded as incidental to the economic promise of this new source of capital. The institutional arrangements that frame the terms of these new global workers' engagement with globalisation and their place in contributing to the dynamics of international money transfers are generally an incidental consideration. Yet, the terms of people's physical incorporation into the global political economy as migrant workers are crucial to understanding the momentum of money flows, and this is the concern of this study.

The study will initially outline the preoccupations of the migration-development discourse, and how the new analytical interest in international migration, and the policies this interest informs, is predicated on arguments in support of 'circular migration' or, more accurately, temporary international labour migration and migrant workers' continuing association with their country of origin as distinct from emigration and resettlement. We then reflect on the constitution of this new global workforce, and the circumscribed character of migrant workers' new-found freedom and how this process of proletarianisation can be usefully characterised in Polanyian terms as the making of a *fictitious commodity*. The study then returns to interrogating the principal preoccupation of the migration-development discourse. The contention of the study is that the making of migrant wage labour, in so far as this is moved by the ambition to generate migrant worker remittances, is just as much about the valorisation of migrant labour *and* the generation of international capital flows and money capital in particular.

Resurgent International Migration and Migration-Development Discourse

The oil price hike of the 1970s marked a turning point in the history of international migration. The economic prosperity that this brought to the Middle East set off a construction boom whose labour requirements were mostly satisfied by the recruitment of migrant workers, the great majority of whom were drawn from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. Most have been engaged on fixed and limited term contracts as low and semi-skilled construction workers or as domestic and other service workers. They were, and continue to be, afforded few if any employment rights; contracts tie them to particular employers, in effect as indentured labour; residence permits remain contingent upon them being gainfully employed. Industrial rights are generally denied and minimum work standards in many instances are non-existent, especially in the case for migrant domestic workers and care workers.

In the ensuing period, the employment of temporary migrant workers has become more extensive. Many advanced industrial economies that had blocked the entry of migrant workers following the end of the long boom, as well as developing economies, have set up schemes that permit the recruitment and employment of migrant workers to meet particular niche labour market needs. Workers are drawn from increasingly diverse origins, with the most recent and significant labour-supply countries the former satellite states of the ex-Soviet Union. The magnitude of this global temporary labour force has also expanded considerably with the growth in numbers of undocumented migrant workers who do not have residence entitlements. Attracted by employment opportunities, and in a number of instances, half-hearted or negligible efforts by regulatory authorities to police entry and/or employment, the undocumented include workers who overstay residence-work visa permits or who enter a country by clandestine means and work 'illegally'.[1]

This growth in international labour migration has translated into a dramatic increase in migrant remittances, or, at the very least, officially recorded migrant remittances.[2] World Bank data highlights the significance of this growth in remittances, the magnitude of which has increased threefold over the last decade and reckoned to be some $US250 billion in 2008. These monies represent a substantial proportion of many developing and transition countries' foreign exchange earnings, and in quite a number of instances the largest single source of export income, greater than Official Development Assistance, and for many developing countries remittances are a more important source of potential investment funds than foreign direct investment.[3]

The intellectual force of the migration-development discourse is founded on a well rehearsed economic thesis. The opportunity for offshore employment is held out as a positive for the labour-supply developing and transition economies, and especially for semi- and low-skilled workers who experience high rates of underemployment and unemployment. Recourse to migrant workers provides a means for labour-receiving countries to meet labour shortfalls, to satisfy labour market needs that cannot be met from local sources — either because there simply are not the workers to work these jobs or because local workers are unwilling to work in these occupations. The thesis holds that migration enables global labour resources to be more fully and effectively deployed. Further, in expanding employment opportunities through offshore employment, international labour migration provides the additional benefit of generating remittances. This source of export income can enhance the economic standing of labour-sending countries and engage migrant workers and their families more directly in the development process.[4]

The critical importance of labour migration and the associated flow of remittances have been well documented. The World Bank, for instance, has commissioned a plethora of studies that document the magnitude and benefits of remittances sent to all corners of the developing world and the transition economies (Mambo et al 2005; Luthsia et al 2006; Mansoor and Quillin 2006; Fajnzylber and Lopez 2008; Wodon 2009). Each of these studies presents a positive case for the benefits of the migration-development nexus, and the World Bank has been joined by a host of other international and multilateral financial institutions in advocating the case for removing restrictions on the international movement of labour as a vehicle for generating income for developing and transition economies. The International Monetary Fund, the African Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank have each directed resources to promoting labour migration as a means of boosting export income. These institutions have, in effect, set the terms of a debate on global labour market liberalisation that has engaged a host of other international and multilateral institutions that almost without exception accept the economic arguments that advertise the advantages of labour migration.[5]

The number of governments that draw on this economic logic to support offshore migrant labour programs as export-earning and economic development strategies continues to grow.[6] Moreover, the Bank and other financial institutions actively engage in efforts to promote labour export and migrant guest worker programs. It has provided policy advice and direction for small countries. The Bank assumed a prominent role in facilitating the Australian government's recent initiative to establish a Pacific Islanders seasonal migrant worker program. It became more directly involved in supporting the scheme, engaging with the Reserve Bank and the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority officials and private banks to ensure that mechanisms were put in place to facilitate the transfer of worker earnings.[7] The Inter-American Development Bank has been particularly active in promoting such schemes in the Caribbean and Central America through its Multilateral Investment Fund.

One of the distinctive emphases in the advocacy of global labour market liberalisation has been an acceptance of temporariness as the most immediate initiative that should be pursued. This has been articulated most succinctly by the World Bank. In *Global Economic Prospects 2006*, the Bank contends that the free international movement of people remains an extremely sensitive issue that governments have to manage, an issue that cannot be sidestepped. The right of national governments to regulate borders cannot be set aside, and the Bank accepts a political future that envisages governments continuing to restrict the free movement of people. Accordingly, the Bank advocates a halfway measure, a political compromise, in the form of temporary labour migration. Temporary labour migration is represented as a politically appealing option because it is reckoned to provide an orderly way for addressing labour market shortages which does not require governments relinquishing border control. Such a regulatory framework is held to provide the means for the governments of labour-receiving countries to take action to end labour migration, should this be warranted, by changing labour market circumstances or in response to fears that the inflow of foreign labour is engendering social tensions. The Bank also argues the case for temporary labour migration as an antidote to 'illegal migration'. It is argued that establishing some employment opportunities will help to discourage undocumented labour migration. The critical point in this advocacy of temporary labour migration is that it holds out the strategic opportunity for further labour market liberalisation: such programs 'may facilitate larger legal flows' (The World Bank 2006: 71–72).

Temporariness is crucial to the economic trajectory of the migration-development discourse. Temporary labour migration ensures that workers retain a connection with their home country, and the continuing connection provides the motivation for migrant workers to remit income to family and communities. The same logic explains the rationale that prompts undocumented workers sending income home. By way of contrast, emigration and resettlement give rise to costs and establish new associations that erode attachment or diminish the capacity of migrants to remit income to their country of origin. Temporariness is thus a crucial, though little articulated, ingredient in the migration-development nexus.

The New Global Worker and the Commodification of Labour

The corollary of the preoccupation with temporariness as the linchpin in the advocacy of increased international migration is the way in which economic discourse frames migration in terms of the movement of labour and, more abstractly, in terms of the deployment of 'human capital'. It is a conceptual orientation that has its parallel in the World Trade Organisation's efforts to advance international labour market liberalisation through the General Agreement on Trade in Services and, more particularly, Mode 4 of the GATS covering the 'Movement of Natural Persons'. The critical significance of this focus is that the case for freeing up the international circulation of 'human capital' is advanced with next to no consideration of the terms and conditions that define migrant workers' incorporation into the global labour market. In advocating a qualified labour market liberalisation that engages semi- and low-skilled migrant workers, there is little more than lip service directed towards addressing the labour market status of such workers.

The dominant economic discourse that has informed the migration-development nexus is founded on a definition of migrant workers as, essentially, factors of production, and developing and transition countries are considered to have an over-supply of these factor endowments. Migration provides the means for their more efficient utilisation or deployment. Yet missing from this oeuvre is an appreciation of the terms and conditions of these migrant workers' incorporation into the international labour market.

Throughout most countries that have established temporary guest worker programs, temporariness goes hand in hand with workers having to secure employment with a particular employer, and it is commonly the case that there are restrictions on the right of workers to terminate their employment contract or seek employment with an alternative employer. The duration of employment contracts is limited, and in many instances, workers are required to return to their country of origin in order to renew and extend their employment or to engage in work for another employer.[8] Restrictions on labour market mobility are not uncommonly underscored by restrictions on physical mobility. Such restrictions reinforce the disadvantage that flows from the overwhelming proportion of migrant workers being concentrated in the 'dirty, dangerous, difficult and demeaning' jobs. Many workers are quarantined in encampments or, in the case of domestic and care workers, largely confined to households. Industrial rights are characteristically limited, and in a number of countries migrant workers are prohibited from joining or forming unions. In most countries, the work of migrant domestic workers and care workers is not recognised as industrially designated 'work' subject to regulation.

The lack of labour market freedom is a defining feature of temporary migrant workers, contra the liberalist tenets of the dominant economic discourse that informs the migration-development nexus. Compounding the subordinate status of migrant workers is a general absence of civil rights. Migrant workers can be subject to a range of restrictions on their mobility and other barriers that impede the exercise of their human rights. The position of undocumented workers is comparable, because, notwithstanding the demand for their labour, and while their irregular status is associated with a freedom to seek employment beyond the regulatory framework of labour migration programs, their labour market and residency status is all the more precarious making them subject to abuses that would not be permitted within the regulated workplace.

In general, the institutional arrangements that define the labour market position of temporary migrant workers and their 'undocumented' compatriots look nothing like the *laissez-faire* labour market proselytised by the dominant economic discourse in which workers have the 'freedom to choose'. These migrant workers are incorporated into the international labour market in a quite severely restricted manner. Their capacity to exercise their labour power may be more fully engaged, as they escape unemployment or underemployment in their home countries, but the terms of this engagement are circumscribed. The opportunity for migrant workers to negotiate their entry onto the global terrain as social subjects is quite limited. They are, in effect, incorporated into the global political economy on terms not dissimilar to other inputs into the production process; their capacity to exercise their labour power is treated as if it is no more than a commodity. But there is more to this, because what rights migrant workers do have are tied to having a contract of employment that specifies the employer, the occupation and the duration of their right to work. The scope they have to determine how they exercise their ability to labour — their labour power — is thus also circumscribed.

Karl Polanyi's analysis of the establishment of the market economy with capitalism's ascendancy provides an instructive lead for interrogating this phenomenon. Polanyi exposes the manner in which capitalist markets privilege economic demands over the social and political: 'A self-regulating market demands nothing less than the institutional separation of society into economic and political spheres … ' (Polanyi 1957: 71). Labour is drawn into the market as if it was a mere commodity, subordinating the social to the 'laws of the market', and 'it is with the help of this fiction that the actual markets for labor … are organized' (Polanyi 1957: 72). This 'commodity fiction … supplies a vital organizing principle in regard to the whole of society affecting almost all its institutions … [and] the market mechanism [seeks] to be the sole director of the fate of human beings' (Polanyi 1957: 73).

Polanyi contests the capacity of the market to effect such a comprehensive subordination of labour to its will, if only because human activity cannot be completely subordinated to the logic of the market; the definition of labour power as a commodity can never be more than a fiction. The limited purchase of the commodification of labour is the effect of what Polanyi ascribes to a 'double movement', the force of economic liberalism engendering the authority of the self-regulating market, on the one hand, and the emergent institutional arrangements that express the social existence of humans and contribute to securing their conservation. On the other hand, it is this 'double movement' that informs the conclusion that labour can not be regarded as anything but a *fictitious commodity*.

In the case of the new global worker however, labour-receiving countries, and particularly the international and multilateral financial institutions that proselytise the liberalisation of international labour migration, have generally treated the semi- and low-skilled migrant workforce as an expendable resource, a resource whose social protection and continued reproduction is of little or no concern. The position of the new class of global workers, who secure their place in the global market through periods of indenture or (undocumented) irregular employment and/or precariousness, suggests the need to qualify Polanyi's argument. The labour market status of the new global workers can very well be characterised as a process of labour being 'shoved about, used indiscriminately', and 'the physical, psychological, and moral entity [that is] "man" ' being desecrated precisely because these workers are robbed of many of the protective institutions that otherwise give substance to the worker as a social subject' (Polanyi 1957: 74).

The Capitalisation of Labour: Transforming Labour Power into Money Capital

The making of the new global worker has been associated with a degree of unfreedom, and this points to a more comprehensive process of commodification than that generally associated with wage labour within capitalism. The employment contract locks the worker into a more subordinate position than that of the classic wage worker who sells a specific property right, the ability to perform labour.[9] In the process, industrial and civil rights tend to be sacrificed. This is, at least, formally the case: temporary migrant workers' employment contracts generally proscribe the exercise of industrial and civil rights. But it is also substantively the case for undocumented migrant workers whose continuing residence and employment status is 'illegal' and contingent upon the goodwill of employers and always subject to the whim of the state in policing migration laws.

The precarious position of the temporary migrant worker can be considered a product of capitalism's myopic and liberalist drive, to treat labour as if it were a commodity, as *The Great Transformation* would contend. But we can draw on Marx's critique, and the analysis of another 'double movement', to formulate a more critically engaged appreciation of the forces that have framed the making of this new class of global worker. The reproduction of wage labour is secured through the exchange of the ability to labour for the means to meet the cost of reproducing that labour, *viz*., money in the form of the wage. On the other hand, the purchase of labour power is integral to the capitalist production process in so far as labour power in the commodity form — that is, objectified labour — is integral to the production of commodities, and, through the sale of these commodities, living labour's conversion into capital. The sale and exercise of labour power in the process of production and exchange is a process of valorisation, both of labour and, through the realisation of the product of labour power, of capital.

The significance of this distinction is apparent in returning to the making of the new global worker. For labour-sending countries, the opportunity to export labour provides a material means, through offshore earnings, for supporting the reproduction of workers and her/his family, and the possibility of injecting additional capital into the economy. But this requires the proletarianisation of labour power, with the constitution of the new global worker, and is premised on the country being incorporated more fully into the international circuit of capital as labour becomes organised as a commodity, through the sale of labour power, as capital, and as migrant workers remit earnings as capital in a money form. For labour-receiving countries, the deployment of migrant workers provides the means to sustain capital accumulation, by meeting labour shortfalls and/or reducing labour costs, and/or through the employment of migrant domestic and care workers cheapening the cost of the reproduction of local labour and their families.

There is yet a particular dimension to this process of valorisation that warrants attention, and this picks up on the enthusiasm of international and multilateral financial institutions in proselytising the liberalisation of international migration. This is the preoccupation with remittances, with financial flows. International labour migration presumes the more generalised proletarianisation of global labour, but the sale of labour power is principally advocated as a means for generating money capital into the labour-sending countries. In some respects, a key development that has engendered this attention has been the failure of the liberalisation of global financial markets to effect shifts in the financial flows to developing economies, either through foreign direct investments or official development assistance as noted at the outset. Remittances are held up as a supplementary, if not alternative, source of finance for the developing economies.

The other vital element in this preoccupation with remittances has been with how the constitution of the new global worker can provide leverage for extending the reach of financial markets into the developing world. The transformation of workers from developing and transition economies, into workers selling their labour power into an international labour market for a wage, opens up the prospect of generating money capital that could provide the foundation for the more extensive development of capitalist social relations and, more particularly, money or financial markets in these economies.[10] The institutional means for advancing this ambition has been neatly encapsulated by the Inter-American Development Bank in the campaign slogan 'banking the unbanked', a project in which the IMF and the World Bank have been intimately involved (Hernandez-

Coss 2004; Orozco 2004; Terry and Wilson 2005; Hernandez-Coss and El-Swaify 2006). This has been linked to World Bank endeavours to engage commercial banks in the 'corporate priority' to establish a more extensive presence in communities that presently do not use banking services. It has been a program that has been most systematically pursued, in conjunction with the Inter-American Development Bank and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, across Latin America and the Caribbean.

The IADB-led project is dedicated to having commercial banks cement their place in the lives of these communities, introducing to the developing economies what the director of the Inter-American Development Bank's Multilateral Investment Fund prosaically describes as 'financial democracy'. 'Financial democracy' promises to provide a financial underlay for the migration-development nexus. It affords individuals and families the opportunity to borrow, in effect in international financial markets, to buy their way into the international circuit of labour, as well as to leverage off remittances and earnings. In considering the manner in which labour migration is advocated as providing a pathway to development, the making of migrant workers is as much about the making of capital, and under the aegis of the World Bank and its sister institutions the generation of money capital assumes a paramount priority. The project was neatly summed by the broadcaster Lorena Allam in introducing the ABC's *Background Briefing* program 'Remittances — Flying Money':

> Suddenly the world's poor are a financial market, and the debate is raging about how to sign them up, how to charge them, and how to channel their earnings into the formal financial system (5 October 2008).

Conclusion

The making of a new class of migrant workers, principally as temporary or undocumented workers concentrated in semi- and low-skilled occupations, is a distinctive development. Such workers can be distinguished from other wage workers who enjoy a more comprehensive freedom in their right to sell their ability to labour. The objectification of these workers' labour may be regarded as being more substantive than that of the classic wage worker. The process of commodification is indeed more exaggerated. The pivotal factor framing the rationale that has impelled the most vocal advocates of international labour migration has been the desire to provide new momentum in international financial flows.

This emphasis on the commodification-financialisation of labour is not to deny the import of Polanyi's critique of wage labour as *fictitious commodities*. On the contrary, the panorama of struggles being waged to promote the employment, industrial and civil rights of migrant workers highlights the purchase of Polanyi's analysis of the 'double movement', the process of commodification being countered by the struggle to secure workers' social protection.[11] This was also the essence of Marx's critique, although it was more broadly framed because the critique emphasised the necessity for looking beyond the act of exchange and the appearance of capital as a mere *thing* to understand capital in its multiple forms as reflecting *specific social relations of production* (Marx 1976: 1005). The Marxist critique demands that we look beyond the rhetoric of the migrant-development discourse that has been predominantly framed in terms of the material benefits that could flow from migrant worker remittances. The policy emphasis of this discourse has focused on advocating the removal of obstacles to the international circulation of labour and institutional arrangements that impede or increase the costs of migrant workers remitting income to their countries of origin, while neglecting the employment, industrial and civil rights of these migrant workers. The overwhelming preoccupation of the migration-development discourse has been with supporting the deployment of labour power *and* with the capitalisation of offshore earnings. Very little consideration has been given by the international financial institutions to the substantial social and material consequences of the making of this new class of global worker. Nor has institutional energy been directed to supporting the participation of migrant workers as anything other than mere commodities, and to considering how such support and recognition could actually enhance these workers' capacity to contribute substantially more to their own and their countries' economic wellbeing.

Notes

1. The issue of 'illegal' status is a contested one because, while the governments of some labour-receiving countries may have well-defined regulations that mandate the issue of residence-work permits for prospective migrant workers prior to workers engaging in employment, the regulations are not necessarily acted on or policed which in effect amounts to tacit endorsement of migrants' clandestine status. It is generally accepted that the status of undocumented workers be regarded as 'irregular' rather than 'illegal'.
2. There is a substantial transfer of money through informal channels, and some of the increase in official estimates of remittance transfers can be attributed to governments of labour-exporting countries and international financial institutions promoting the transfer of migrant worker' offshore earnings through official channels.
3. The World Bank began to direct more attention to the increased significance of migrant remittances in a series of forums that culminated in 2003 in *Global Development Finance 2003: Striving for Stability in Development Finance*, and the subsequent dedication of the 2006 issue of *Global Economic Prospects* to the subject (The World Bank 2006).
4. The logic of the argument is consistent with the theory of comparative advantage, with the developing and transition 'labour-rich' economies specialising in the export of labour, and particularly in the supply of semi- and low-skilled labour, releasing higher skilled workers in developed economies to be more productively and efficiently engaged in higher skilled occupations. The logic holds that this engenders economic welfare gains in both labour-receiving and labour-sending countries (Winters et al 2003; Maimbo and Ratha 2005; World Bank 2006).
5. These include: the International Organization for Migration, several United Nations agencies, including the 2006 High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development and the UN-sponsored Global Forum on Migra-

tion and Development; the International Labour Organization; the OECD; the World Trade Organization; the European Commission, and; the Global Commission on International Migration.

6. The Philippines government was among the first to promote labour migration as an export revenue generating strategy. The oil price hike of the 1970s became a catalyst for some state governments in India, most notably Kerala, the governments of Pakistan and later Bangladesh and Indonesia to promote labour migration. Similar programs have been supported by Pacific Island states for a considerable period of time, though they have become more strategically focused, such as with Fiji's provision of military personnel engaged in UN peace missions. More recently, there has been considerable resources dedicated to promoting temporary labour migration schemes by North African and sub-Saharan states with several European Union states. Temporary labour migration programs have become a key feature of several Eastern European and Central Asian states that support the deployment of labour into Europe and Russia.
7. A World Bank senior economist, and chief author of *At Home and Away*, led the Bank's representations (*The Australian Financial Review* 20 August 2008).
8. For most migrant workers engaged in semi- and low-skilled occupations the contract of employment is in effect a contract of indenture.
9. See Michael Lebowitz (2003) who develops this point, expanding upon Marx (Marx 1976: Ch.6, especially pp. 270–274). The argument here parallels that of Marx's distinction between the formal subsumption of labour, effected through the employment contract entailing the sale of the worker's capacity to labour — that is, the sale of labour power — and the real (or substantive) subsumption of labour effected through the organisation and rhythm of capitalist production. For the new global worker the real subsumption of labour is effected through the limits imposed on mobility, on the freedom to contract, and on the exercise of industrial, social and civil rights.
10. This is not to argue that there are not also indigenous forces that are also driving this process. For instance, the Philippines government celebrates the contribution of its migrants workers as 'investor heroes' because their offshore employment provides a potential source of investment funds (Ramamurthy 2003).
11. These include struggles for migrant workers, non-government organisations supporting migrant worker rights' campaigns, international agencies, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO 2004), and some of the governments of labour-sending countries that have established labour attachés in diplomatic posts as well as sought to negotiate bilateral migrant worker accords with labour-receiving countries ('Civil Society Dialogue' 2008).

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