

Critical Theory and Theology of the Signs of the Times: Towards an Emancipated Humanity

*Allan A. Basas, S.Th.D.*¹

Abstract

There are intersections between the kind of theologizing done in the Catholic Church in the years leading to and after the Second Vatican Council, known as Theology of the Signs of the Times, and in the way that critical theorists engendered philosophizing during the same period. Mainly, Critical Theories and the Theology of the Signs of the Times emphasize the shift from conceptual thinking to thinking that is socially and historically grounded. As such, both focus on the critique of the reified society where the suffering poor are oppressed all the more. In view of the foregoing, this essay discusses the following main themes: 1) basic impulses of critical theory; 2) main points of the Theology of Signs of the Times, and; 3) intersecting points between Critical Theory and the Theology of the Signs of the Times.

Keywords: Critical Theory, Theology of the Signs of the Times, Critical Impulse, Reified Society, Emancipation

¹ The author is a faculty member of the Institute of Religion, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines. Email: aabasas@ust.edu.ph.

Introduction

Critical Theory and the Theology of the Signs of the Times are concrete ways of doing philosophy and theology. Both disciplines take as their starting point for reflection, the human experience which leads to praxis. They are products of their own time, responses of well-meaning and likeminded people, so to say, who realized that philosophy and theology must be critically committed, i.e., critical of oppressive social structures and committed to the emancipation of a humanity shackled by a reified society. In this article, therefore, I offer a reflection that pursues the on-going dialogue between philosophy and theology, which seeks to offer to humanity answers to their questions pertinent to their thriving in the context of a society which legitimized the dominance of the few over the disempowered vast majority. This paper pursues this task by answering the following queries: First, what impulses emanate from critical theories? Second, what impact does the Theology of the Signs of the Times have on Christian praxis? And third, where do Critical Theory and the Theology of the Signs of the Times intersect in its critique of the society and history? These questions that this essay intends to answer shed light on the understanding or reinterpretation of the Christian faith, which need to be more politically responsible, eschatologically oriented, and resolutely attentive to suffering.²

Critical Theory

Having emerged from the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt in 1923, Critical Theory advanced modes of sociohistorical inquiry that challenged traditional philosophical analysis.³ With the predominant leitmotif of shifting from consciousness to culture and society, critical theorists embarked on the task of shaping self-understanding in a way that

² Philip Kennedy, *Schillebeeckx: Outstanding Christian Thinkers Series* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 50-51.

³ David C. Hoy and Thomas McCarthy, *Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1994), 8.

it would have an impact on how people live. The pioneering Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who labored from 1923 to the 1940s, represent the first generation of theorists while Jurgen Habermas and later, his students and sympathizers, led the second and third generations respectively.⁴ As first-hand witnesses to the “barbarism” wrought by Auschwitz and the reifying tendencies of consumer capitalism, the Frankfurt School saw themselves as providing a critique of these social conditions.⁵ Thus, Critical Theory engendered impulses that are fundamental for the critique of existing social structures and collective actions. We gather the following critical impulses from a survey of some of the major works of Adorno.⁶

Emancipation

Critical theorists are indebted to the enlightenment project for its influence on modern emancipation movements, to wit: refusal to submit to any established religion, eradication of slavery, struggle against injustices and oppression, and democratization of the use of reason.⁷ How this epochal movement helped bring down the tyrannical *status quo* serves as a paradigm for thinkers who support the liberal use of reason by all in order to contest the social order that exacerbate the suffering of those unjustly relegated to the peripheries of the society. In this free use of reason, rational discourses are once more for public consumption and not esoteric enterprises confined to privileged persons and spaces. In this sense, Critical Theory, Habermas in particular, saw that interpretation must work not just to recover the meaning that is found in tradition but to expose even the dark side of history where repression, violence, and alienation, which had marked the ascendance of

⁴ Kennedy, *Schillebeeckx*, 49.

⁵ Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory: Studies in Literature and Religion*, Second Edition, Graham Ward, Ed. (Great Britain: Mcmillan Press, Ltd., 2000), xiii.

⁶ We gather these critical impulses from some of the works Adorno, to wit: *The Actuality of Philosophy*; *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*; *Education After Auschwitz*; *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, among others.

⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Language of Faith: Essays of Jesus, Theology, and the Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 72.

dominant meaning, lie hidden.⁸ In other words, Critical Theory puts forward a historical understanding that exposes repressive relationships to the extent that they are experiences of violence and legitimations of coercion and domination.⁹ As was pointed out in the foregoing, modern emancipation movements witnessed the flourishing of new knowledge. This was the condition that ushered the springtime of science and technology. However, in the long run, science and technology conjured a way of life that necessitated total dependence on it, but not without alarming side effects.¹⁰ Moreover, against the backdrop of an emancipatory impulse, critical theories addressed social and political issues such as, labor, crises arising from capitalism and socialism, fascism and the control of culture through a critical praxis of contestation.

Materiality

We refer to Adorno to cursorily describe what materiality means: “whoever chooses philosophy as a profession today must first reject the illusion that earlier philosophical enterprises began with: that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real.”¹¹ Here, Adorno finds an ally in G.W.F. Hegel, who taught that philosophy is a product of its own time, i.e., shaped by social, political, and historical conditions. On these grounds, we surmise that for Adorno the totality of reality is only fully unveiled if it is grounded on socio-historical conditions and a denial of this runs the risk of concealing reality. This observation stresses Adorno’s ambivalent attitude towards the enlightenment project, specifically where it regresses back into tyranny or what he calls new forms of barbarism. This is where he shows his aversion to those forms of philosophizing, which claim to be perennial and the sole and rightful conveyer of truth.¹² For Adorno, thought becomes fruitful only dialectically, in other words, the assumptions of philosophy are inextricably bound to

⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, Robert Schreiter, Ed. (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1984), 107.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

¹⁰ Schillebeeckx, *The Language of Faith*, 72.

¹¹ Theodor Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” in *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 10 (1977): 120.

¹² Theodor Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 7.

the historical problems and therefore cannot be resolved independently of them.¹³ Herein, it is pointed out that the philosopher's thinking and acting cannot but be affected by the exigencies of history. Therefore, philosophers should be vigilant against reifying tendencies where concepts become more real than the object, forgetful of the material-visceral-origin of thought. Through configurative language, philosophy is able to sidestep conceptual reification.¹⁴

Critique of the Culture Industry

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Max Horkheimer opine that Fascism has evolved into new forms after its onslaught during World War II.¹⁵ One of the more conspicuous forms that it has taken on is the culture industry. Herein, the two pointed out that over the years, man has moved from the imitation of nature to its subjugation. As exercised in the culture industry, a capitalist, in pursuit of his goals and ends, finds justification to cheat his consumers by advertising half-truths or empty promises. The subliminal effect of the culture industry entices people to live their lives in a fantasy world where the "good life" is equated with the possession or knowledge of what is considered a fad.¹⁶ It appears that the culture industry has succeeded in hammering into the minds of the public that "having" is more important than "being", a compulsive character of a society alienated from itself.¹⁷ This is where man is driven by his inordinate desire to absorb whatever garbage is thrown at him by the capitalist. As Adorno quips:

The most intimate reactions of human beings have become so entirely reified, even to themselves, that the idea of anything peculiar to them survives only

¹³ Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," 121.

¹⁴ Configurative language means the ability to rethink the non-identical by constantly refiguring the constellation of its concepts in order to live up to its imperative of accommodating new possibilities.

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. By Edmund Jephcott (California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 10.

¹⁶ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991). 95

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

in extreme abstraction: personality means hardly any more than dazzling white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions, that is the triumph of advertising in the culture industry: the compulsive imitation by consumers of cultural commodities which, at the same time, they recognize as false.¹⁸

Suffering

Adorno, as we have previously discussed, insists on the materiality or anchorage of philosophy on historical exigencies. Here, Adorno uses the dreadful memory of Auschwitz to conjure the feeling of guilt in all of us. This guilt originates from his discussion of the materiality of philosophy, i.e, philosophy should be a critical reflection and interaction with social, political, and historical conditions. Adorno points out that it behooves philosophers to be moral, in order to prevent a repeat of Auschwitz.¹⁹ This morality arises from the visceral experience of pain and suffering of others, which should nag philosophers to be moved by the abject poverty and misery of society's so-called refuse. But this can only happen if philosophers will descend from their ivory towers and start to think and act realistically about what others feel. Adorno avers that "the resistance to guilt is not the resistance to the horror of Auschwitz, but rather, the exacerbation of violence, a case of adding insult to injury! Hence, the only proper response of philosophy to damaged life is an ethical one informed by guilt."²⁰

We gather from these impulses engendered by critical theorists, that philosophy must be true to its *raison d'etre*: to be mindful of humanity. Philosophers who are mindful of this are constantly perturbed by their moral obligation to hear out the cries of human beings and at the same time to call out or criticize those who are responsible for their unjust situations. But to be authentic companions of society's poor and suffering, philosophers must first understand the world of the poor. Adorno

¹⁸ Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 136.

¹⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Education after Auschwitz* accessed from <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/education-after-auschwitz-theodor-w-adorno/> last 12 December 2017, 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

finds in this world a reified society, where people are treated as expendables by modern-day barbarians: the technocrats and politicians. Any philosopher who is forgetful and turns a blind eye or a deaf ear to the horrors and evils of his generation perpetrates and perpetuates the barbarism of Auschwitz. Hence, resistance and contestation instead of acceptance or apathy must emanate from this guilt. And therefrom, philosophers must put forward their agenda for the denunciation and struggle against injustice and oppression.

Theology of the Signs of the Times

In the years leading to the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church was moved towards a new and specific way of doing theology, called: "Theology of the Signs of the Times."²¹ By undertaking the task of theologizing anew, in the context of a rapidly changing world, the question of reinterpreting the faith in such a way that it becomes more politically responsible and historically grounded becomes pressing. In other words, as Gustavo Gutierrez remarked in his first formulation of liberation theology when Christians come contact with the acute problems of their contexts, they experience an urgent need to take part in solutions to the problems.²² Thus, the response of faith requires not just the unconditional assent of the intellect to revealed truths but also the realization of this faith through concrete actions that pursue, among other things, the liberation of human beings.

Theology with Critical Impulse

The Filipino theologian, Catalino Arevalo, reflecting on the Theology of the Signs of the Times, avers that three major signs of the times are discernible in the modern period: "first, workmen

²¹ The phrase signs of the times was first used by Pope John XXIII in the bull *Humanae Salutis* and encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. The phrase is found in Matthew 16:2-4. Jesus Christ used it in speaking to the Jews, He says: "In the evening you say, it will be fine; there is a red sky. And in the morning, stormy weather today; the sky is red and overcast. You know how to read the face of the sky, but you cannot read the signs of the times."

²² Gustavo Gutierrez, "Toward a New Method: Theology and Liberation," in *Gustavo Gutierrez: Essential Writings*, James B. Nickoloff, ed. (Makati City, Philippines: St. Paul's Philippines, 2004), 23.

all over the world fight for greater participation in all the areas of human life; second, women assert their right to be respected and hence no longer to be treated as mere objects; and third, nations which once were colonies are now bent on shedding any vestiges of dependency on, and any sense of inferiority to former colonial powers.”²³ In all of these, we can discern the critical impulse towards emancipation, which is implied in the clamor for participation, empowerment, and respect. By taking into consideration the said critical impulses, the emergent leitmotif is the welling desire for personalization and socialization.²⁴ The former stresses the holistic growth of the individual towards full personhood so that he can be an active participant in the community where he belongs to. Socialization, on the other hand, emphasizes inter-subjectivity where people are called to work interdependently towards mutuality. The Theology of the Signs of the Times insists that doing theology or interpreting the faith in the contemporary times demands mindfulness of these human conditions. But what distinguishes the Theology of the Signs of the Times from secular critical reflections is its belief that God is actively present in human history, and leads humanity towards the fulfillment of His divine designs. Herein, not everything about the world is evil and one only needs to be docile to the presence of God to discover that His immense grace suffices to overcome the prevarications and ruins of man. This belief, which accompanies the activity of the Church in the world, affirms the inseparability of the two-fold dimensions of action and reflection or interpretation. Thus, the Theology of the Signs of the Times is a call to Christians to walk the talk of faith.²⁵

Locating the Signs of the Times

According to Pope John XXIII, the signs of the times can be located in our desires and questions as human beings.²⁶ As a new world order has been put forward as a result of advancements in science and technology, in a very general way, unfolding before

²³ Catalino Arevalo, “On the Theology of the Signs of the Times,” *Landas*, 25 (2011), 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ Gutierrez, “Toward A New Method,” 25.

²⁶ Arevalo, “On the Theology of the Signs of the Times,” 10.

our eyes, in such a dizzying phase, are for example, more efficient and faster means of transportation and communication, signs of so-called progress. Expectedly, these should translate into greater mobility and connectedness, which should benefit the personal and social life of human beings. But it appears that the opposite has become more palpable, we can make a case that relationships in this day and age have become more virtual than real. In this reified society, the Church warns against the growing apathy towards the plight of the needy. Consequently, the more we distance ourselves from human predicaments, the less configured we are to the will of God. It is for this reason that the Theology of the Signs of the Times takes-off from empirical and anthropological data, i.e., from what is going on in the world and what is going on in man. As such, this kind of theologizing strives to discern the will of God informed by what is happening in the world as well as by the questions and aspirations of man.²⁷ It is in this regard that we come to know that the Church regards as most urgent the two aspirations of man in the contemporary times, namely: equality and participation.²⁸ The Church believes that in knowing the aspirations of man we can also know the will of God and this is where all the Christian action must take place. An important concept that could help us understand the Theology of the Signs of the Times is “contextualization” which means the interweaving of the Gospel with every particular situation. This approach, which emerged during the early 1970s specifically in Asian, Latin American, and African theologies, is directed towards the formation of a theology that is shaped by social, political, economic, and religious contexts.²⁹ As contextualized, theology takes into consideration processes such as secularism, technology, and the struggle for human justice. Moreover, it takes as its starting point the concrete human experiences; their joys and hopes, grief and anxieties, as the context on which the Gospel is to be incarnated.

PCP II: Church of the Poor

²⁷ Ibid., 12.

²⁸ Ibid., 13.

²⁹ Brian Stanley, “Inculturation: Historical Background, Theological Foundations and Contemporary Questions.” *Transformation* 24, 1 (Jan 2007): 22 21-27.

An expression or form of the Theology of the Signs of the Times is the Church of the Poor of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II). To be a Church of the Poor means to participate truly in the prophetic mission of Christ to seek the downtrodden and outcasts in the society and to proclaim to them that the kingdom of God is just an earshot away. Accordingly, it is only by being a Church of the Poor that the Church in the Philippines can become a communion, a sign and instrument for the unity of the Filipino People.³⁰ The Church of the Poor demands from its members an act of conversion, which PCP II explains by quoting the Beatitudes: “how blessed are the poor in spirit: the kingdom of Heaven is theirs” (Mt. 5:3). Herein, conversion entails a kenotic experience, which in the words of Jesus Christ is expressed as: “the greatest among you must be your servant. Anyone who raises himself up will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be raised up” (Mt. 23: 11-12). Thus, the Church in the Philippines, to be a true companion of the poor must deny earthly glory and proclaim the message of the Gospel through the practice of humility and self-sacrifice. More concretely, demanding solidarity with the poor, the PCP II, hopes to disturb the privileged in the present social order, which implies taking a stand against all unjust and oppressive structures in the Philippine society that exploit the poor and worsen their condition. In view of this, the faithful, as PCP II pointed out, have the moral obligation to work for the poor, as strongly pointed out in the following passages lifted by the Council from the Bible:

Yes, there are wicked men among my people who watch like fowls on the alert; they set traps and they catch human beings. Like a cage full of birds so are their houses full of loot; they have grown rich and powerful because of it, they are fat, they are sleek, in wickedness they go to any lengths: they have no respect for rights, for orphans' rights, and yet they succeed! They have not upheld the cause of the needy (Jer. 5:25-28).

³⁰ Pedro S. de Achutegui, S.J., *121 Questions and Answers on The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Quezon City: Cardinal Bea Institute, Ateneo de Manila University, 1991), 36.

Well now, you rich! Lament, weep for the miseries that are coming to you. Your wealth is rotting, your clothes are all moth-eaten. All your gold and your silver are corroding away, and the same corrosion will be a witness against you and eat into your body. It is like a fire, which you have stored up for the final days. Can you hear crying out against you the wages, which you kept back from the laborers mowing your fields? The cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord Sabbath (Jas 5:1-4).

In addressing the conditions of the poor, the PCP II echoes the universal Church's assertion of the principles: the universal destiny of the goods of the earth and the struggle against injustice and oppression.³¹ These principles find concrete and determinate application in PCP II's reflection on the plight of the workers, to wit: "therefore, with attention to the functions of each owner or employers, management or labor and without doing harm to the necessary unity of management, the active sharing of all in the administration and profits of these enterprises in ways to be properly determined is to be promoted."³² Moreover, in solidarity with the vast majority of laborers who suffer from the alienation of their rights, PCP II found inspiration in the encyclical *Laborem Exercens*: "this solidarity must be present whenever it is called for by the social degrading of the subject of work, by exploitation of the workers, and by the growing areas of poverty and even hunger. The Church is firmly committed to this cause, for she considers it her mission, her service, a proof of her fidelity to Christ so that she can truly be the "Church of the poor".³³

³¹ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. *Lumen Gentium*. AAS, 57, 1 (30 January 1965), 23. See Quevedo, *Missions and the Church in the Philippines*, 3. "Mission is about the power of the Spirit of Jesus in the struggle against sinfulness in the heart of humanity, in individual lives and in the relationships and structures of injustice, domination, alienation which sin establishes in the society."

³² Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. *Gaudium et Spes*. AAS 57, 15 (7 December 1966), 68.

³³ *LE*, 8.

Intersections

As opined earlier, Critical Theory and the Theology of the Signs of Times intersect or agree on several points. Such intersections are crucial for the development of a theology that seeks to address the socio-historical conditions that directly impact the lives of the people. Shedding light on this is Edward Schillebeeckx, one of those few theologians who valorized Critical Theory vis-à-vis Catholic theology. He opines that “a purely theoretical, philosophical hermeneutics is untenable because understanding can be severely frustrated by social and political structures.”³⁴ Therefore, emancipative, practical, and critical interest can be imported from Critical Theory to engender a way of doing a theology that is docile to human suffering, the threats to the human existence, and a negative dialectics which lead humankind to eschatological freedom.³⁵ This, we referred hitherto as Theology of the Signs of the Times.

Towards an Emancipated *Humanum*

We presuppose that critical theorists and critically committed Christians walked the same human history. Both were traumatized by the horrors of Auschwitz, so to say. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that there are conspicuous intersecting impulses in the two fields but we shall focus only on one: emancipation. We understand that for Critical Theory and theology, the meaning of freedom is understood in its two-fold sense: “freedom from” and “freedom for”. The former implies the liberation of the poor and marginalized from the dehumanizing and reifying tendencies of the tyrannical transcendental subject (largely represented by, although not limited to, technocrats and politicians); the harrowing poverty of the faceless majority; and debilitating prejudices and discriminations that come in many forms. On the other hand, “freedom for” is the longing to experience genuine personhood through the free exercise of reason and the experience of healing from the trauma of hegemony. From the foregoing, we can surmise that emancipation

³⁴ Kennedy, *Schillebeeckx*, 50.

³⁵ Schillebeeckx, *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, 107.

is first, contextualized, second, mindful of the sufferings of humanity, and third, calls for genuine conversion.

First, emancipation is contextualized because it is anchored on socio-historical conditions or, as pointed out earlier, materiality which is concerned with what is going on in the world and what is going on in man. Critical theorists and critically committed Christians who reflect on emancipation critique the reified society for what it has done to laborers, women and children, and third world countries. Moreover, such reflections entail a critical remembrance of lived experiences of emancipation and the lack of it, such as Auschwitz, Martial Law, EDSA People Power, Fall of the Berlin Wall, and all those events that we regard as lights and shadows in the history of humanity.

Second, reflections on emancipation gather more valor in its mindfulness of human suffering. To be aware of the sufferings of others is to be motivated to act in their favor and to see to it that such sufferings are neither prolonged nor repeated. Suffering here, conjures images of the Jews in concentration camps waiting in line to be sent to their death, political prisoners who are silenced because they uphold and preach opposing views, women and children treated as objects with exchange values, and the dehumanized poor who are forced to live under extreme conditions of poverty which make them forget that they too have inviolable dignity.

Lastly, in the struggle for emancipation, there is a common impulse to conversion. We recall that in our earlier discussion of critical theory, Adorno inquired about the possibility of philosophy after Auschwitz. There is a kind of loss of innocence that is being implied here which points to the philosopher's need to have conversion: philosophy cannot be naïve, i.e., oblivious to what is happening. The same can be said of theology and theologians. How is it possible to theologize, to talk about the kingdom of God without paying attention to the suffering *humanum*? The answer is the same for both: We cannot but be changed by the experience of others and we must show this not just in our reflections but also in our praxis. Therefore, this change of heart is, in general, expressed as the ability to sacrifice

oneself and one's idols in life. The dominant "I" must decrease for the benefit of the reified "other". That the "I" must decrease implies that one's neighbor should be treated as a person, a subject, and an agent as well, instead of a mere reified object with corresponding equal exchange value. Here, conversion demands that the "I" must exercise responsibility towards the other.

Conclusion

At the onset, the expressed aim of this paper is threefold: 1) exposition of the basic impulse of critical theory; 2) discussion the main points of the Theology of Signs of the Times, and; 3) outline the intersecting points in critical theory and the theology of the signs of the times. With regard to the first point, we gather from critical theories the impulse towards emancipation, anchorage in social, political, and historical exigencies, suffering, and culture industry. In the second point, the Theology of the Signs of the Times points us towards those movements in the Church, where the faith needs to be articulated with greater sensitivity to the plight of the poor as the condition for configuring ourselves to the will of God. The final point is an attempt to explore the talking points between critical theories and critically committed Christians which can be summed up by their mindfulness of humanity.

So, where do all these discussions regarding the intersection between Critical Theory and Theology lead us to? It points out the urgent call for philosophers and theologians alike to be agents of social transformation. Now, more than ever, this is a critical role that they should assume given that threats to human existence have multiplied exponentially, to wit: global warming, the renewed threat of nuclear war, terrorism, refugees and migration, human trafficking, and fake news, among others. Critical theory and Theology of the Signs of the times, as specific ways of doing philosophy and theology in our time, aver that nobody is an outsider anymore. Philosophers and theologians alike are just as involved as everyone else is in contributing positively to help find solutions to the problems that beset humanity. This is not to posit that philosophers and theologians are obligated to draft concrete laws, policies, and measures as this

is a task incumbent upon state leaders who are confronting their own demons locally. The role of philosophy and theology is to be critically committed to exposing the totality of history where repression, violence, and alienation had marked the ascendance of a few and the powerlessness of the majority. To be neglectful of this all too important role is to legitimize unjust and oppressive social structures which curtail the full development of human beings towards full personhood.

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