

Marxism

A Religion Profile from International Students, Inc.

Marxism: An Overview

Marxist ideology draws its inspiration from the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It stresses the need for a political and economic system that abolishes private property, and in which all materials goods are held in common by all people. As we shall see, Marxism involves several areas of thought, including not only economics and politics, but also ethics, history, human nature, and religion. It is a total “world view.”

It is not difficult to understand why Marxist thinking appeals to so many people. We live in a world of economic extremes. The disparity between the rich and the poor is great. Understandably, then, Marxism’s promise of economic equality is attractive to many who desire to eliminate such extremes. Marxism also appeals to those looking for hope and meaning in life but are disillusioned with other ideologies.

No one knows how many people in the world are committed to Marxism. But there can be no denying that it had an unsurpassed influence on humankind during the 20th century. Although it has suffered severe political and economic setbacks in recent years (particularly in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe), Marxism remains a viable and appealing ideology to many.

Even in American universities, Marxism wields tremendous influence. An article in *U.S. News and World Report*, January 25, 1982, stated that there were 10,000 Marxist professors on America’s campuses. An article in the August 29, 1989, *Denver Post* stated that as many as 90 percent of faculty members at some Midwestern universities are Marxists. The influence of these professors on the thinking of students in U.S. universities should not be underestimated.

History of Marxism

Early Roots

Throughout history there have been people who have proposed ideas similar to those of Karl Marx. In the 300s B.C., Plato

proposed communal ownership on property by the ruling class in *The Republic*. During medieval times, many religious orders practiced the commonality of goods. Thomas More in his book *Utopia* (1516) proposed common ownership of property.

Several factors existing in the late 1700s and early 1800s provided the impetus for an increase in this type of thinking. One was the French Revolution which emphasized the equality of all people. Another was the Romantic Movement which fostered a high view of human nature and the perfectibility of people and society. A third was the Industrial Revolution which thrived on a large unskilled labor force in the factories. Many of these laborers worked and lived under extremely difficult conditions.

In light of the influence of these factors, socialist thinking was found in many writers of the early 1800s. Among these were Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Etienne Cabet, Robert Owen (who founded New Harmony, Indiana), Louis Blanc, Pierre Proudhon, Prosper Enfantin, Victor Considerant, and August Comte.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

Karl Marx was born May 5, 1818, at Trier, Prussia, to Heinrich and Henriette Marx. His father was a lawyer. Both his parents were Jews, having descended from a long line of rabbis. However, in order to continue his law practice in a “Christian” environment, Heinrich converted to Lutheranism in 1816. Karl and his siblings were baptized in 1824.

During his years in school at Trier, Marx wrote a paper on John 15 concerning the importance of union with Christ. In it he said, “Union with Christ bestows inner exaltation, consolation in suffering, calm assurance, and a heart which is open to love of mankind, to all that is noble, to all that is great, not out of ambition, not through the desire of fame, but only because of Christ.” (Geisler, 68). His school records show that Marx was “of evangelical faith” and that his “moral

behavior towards superiors and fellow pupils was good” (Mazlish, 45). Marx identified at least externally with the Christian faith.

In 1835, Marx went to the University of Bonn, and a year later to the University of Berlin. After completing his work in philosophy at the University of Berlin, his dissertation was finally accepted by the University of Jena, which granted Marx his Ph.D. in 1841. By the time he had started his university education, he was an atheist. While there, he was influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach’s critique of religion as a creation of man, as well as by Bruno Bauer and Richard Strauss (the latter said Jesus never existed). As a student he identified with the “Young Hegelians,” the liberal branch of the followers of Hegel.

Though Marx hoped to obtain a teaching position, his liberal political views forced him to pursue a career in journalism. In 1843, he married Jenny von Westphalen, who was from an aristocratic family in Trier. That same year they moved to Paris where Marx wrote briefly for a newspaper. There they came into contact with many radical thinkers. Among them was Friedrich Engels (son of a German industrialist), who would become Karl’s lifelong friend and collaborator.

Between 1845 and 1848, the Marxes moved several times between various countries in Europe. In 1848, Marx and Engels published *The Communist Manifesto* for the Communist League (composed mostly of intellectuals and professionals). It was a summons to revolution. This established them as the leading theoreticians of the Communist Movement.

In 1849, Marx and Engels moved to England. Engels went to work for his father’s factory in Manchester. The Marxes lived in London, where they spent most of the remainder of their lives in poverty. Marx’s only regular income was as a foreign correspondent for the *New York Tribune*. Most of the rest of their income came from periodic gifts from Engels.

Marx devoted his life to studying at the British Museum and writing on a variety of themes, particularly economics. In 1858, he published *Outlines for a Critique of Political Economy*. In 1864, he emerged as leader of the First International Workingman’s Association. In 1867, Marx published the first volume of *Capital*, which was largely a critique of capitalist economics. The second and third volumes were published by Engels (from Marx’s notes) after his death. This would prove to be his major life work.

Marx continued to write during his later years, but suffered many serious health problems. He died March 14, 1883. Of his seven children (one died at childbirth), only two survived him (both of them later committed suicide) (Mazlish 64).

Marx was relatively unknown outside revolutionary circles

during his life. His works were not widely read until after his death. There were only six people at his funeral. The closing words of Engels’ oration at his funeral, however, have proven true: “His name will endure through the ages, and so also his work!” (Sowell, 186).

Marxism after Marx

Though Marx and Engels laid the foundation for the ideology which became known as Marxism, its development was shaped by a number of other writers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1889, at the meeting of the Second International Workingman’s Association in Paris, a conflict arose between Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein. The latter believed that a gradual approach was better than the revolutionary doctrine propounded by Marx. He believed the political and economic system could be changed gradually. Those who followed Bernstein became known as “Revisionists.” Modern “Eurocommunism” represented this line of thinking. Kautsky, on the other hand, defended the need for revolution to institute socialism. He became the leading theoretician of orthodox Marxism in the late 19th century.

No one influenced the future of the Marxist more than V.I. Lenin. He emerged in the early 20th century as leader of the Bolshevik wing of the Social Democratic Party in Russia. It was because of his leadership that the Communists came to power in Russia in 1917. He differed from Marx in at least the following respects: First, he believed that it was necessary for the Communist Party to take control of the revolution rather than expecting the working class to instigate it on its own. He also believed that the party would need to take tight control of socialist society after the revolution. Second, he believed that capitalism had not disintegrated, as Marx predicted, because of its imperialistic exploitation of the third world. Thus, he believed that a communist revolution would take place in a non-industrialized society like Russia rather than in industrialized countries like Great Britain or the U.S. Since 1917, the Communist Movement has been more accurately defined as Marxism-Leninism.

After Lenin died in 1924, Josef Stalin consolidated control over the Communist Party, and eventually became Head of State. He instituted the most brutal form of totalitarianism rule. It is estimated that he was responsible for the liquidation of 20 million people (Hill, *Turbulent Times*, 70).

After WWII, communism spread to many other countries outside the Soviet Union, notably to China and Eastern Europe. The brutality of Stalinism gave rise in the 1950s to a more humanistic strain of Marxism, particularly in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The humanistic Marxists drew from Marx’s earlier writings the idea that the goal of socialism was to liberate humankind from a state of “alienation,” and to enable people to fulfill their potential.

They sought a more democratic kind of socialism than did Stalin. In recent years, most communist societies have experienced severe economic crises which have led to the collapse of communist regimes.

Major Ideas of Marxism

Philosophical Materialism

Marxism is based on a materialistic perception of reality. That is, Marxists believe there is no supernatural or immaterial realm of reality. Reality is fundamentally material. Not that they deny the existence of the mind, or reduce thought to a physiological process, but they believe the mind is a product of the brain and does not survive death. Engels said, "The real unity of the world consists in its materiality...But if the...question is raised: what then are thought and consciousness, and whence they come, it becomes apparent that they are products of the human brain and that man himself is a product of nature" (quoted in Noebel, 133).

Marxists thus deny the existence of a Creator and accept the Darwinian theory of evolution. They stress the importance of the scientific process in observing reality. They also emphasize the role of practical experience in testing ideas.

Dialectical Process

Closely associated with their materialism is the Marxist view that all reality is in the process of change and advancement through what they call the dialectic. Georg W.F. Hegel had developed the concept of the dialectic based on idealism (that is, that ideas were the driving force of reality). Marx and Engels adapted it to their materialism. They believed that all things are in a process of development, and that this development takes place through the interaction of opposing forces inherent in all things. These forces are called the "thesis" and "antithesis." Through the conflict of these two forces emerges a new entity called the "synthesis." Marx and Engels believed that they saw this process at work in nature (e.g., through the evolution of new species, or through the germination of a seed and its growth into a plant). They also believed it was at work in history, through the economic and social advancement of humanity. They saw this as an inevitable process of change, based on scientific social laws.

Economic Determinism

As a result of their materialist philosophy, Marxists hold to what is called economic determinism. Writing in the preface to the 1888 edition of *The Communist Manifesto*, Engels said:

"In every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of the economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch" (DeKoster, 11).

In other words, economics determines everything about a society, including government, the prevailing ideas, laws, and even religion. Economics, not ideas, is the determining factor in history. Even "human nature" is determined by the economic system.

Class Struggle

Marx believed that the history of society was the history of class struggle. Ever since the means of production (factories, etc.) have been privately owned, society has been divided into competing classes. Engels said: "The whole history of mankind...has been a history of class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes" (DeKoster, 11). One can easily see that economic and social change comes about as the result of the outworking of the dialectical process at work between the classes. The two opposing classes (representing the thesis and antithesis) conflict until a new social and economic order is created (the synthesis).

Marx taught that when a given stage in economic history reaches maturity, the next stage will emerge. It is necessary, however, that some form of revolution take place to bring about this change. Marx identified six stages of economic history. First, there was tribal communalism. The tribal group owned all things in common. Second, there was slave labor. Conquering groups enslaved their adversaries. Third, there was feudalism. Powerful landowners granted protection and small portions of land to "peasants" who worked the land for them. Fourth, there was capitalism. Under the capitalist system, the "bourgeois" owned the means of production, while the "proletariat" worked for wages. Marx envisioned a fifth stage: socialism. After seizing the means of production from the bourgeois, the proletariat would institute a dictatorship through which it would cleanse society of all class distinctions based on private property. The sixth and final stage of history would then appear: communism. As class distinctions disappeared, the state itself would fade away. Peace and prosperity would prevail.

Critique of Capitalism

Marx agreed that the capitalist phase was necessary in order to amass the means of production and to develop them to their fullest potential. But he saw elements in capitalism that required its eventual overthrow. The most important was that he felt capitalism fostered exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeois. He saw evidence of this particularly in what he called "surplus value." Adopting the commonly held "labor theory of value" (the idea that the value of a commodity is determined by the labor required to produce it), Marx observed that the capitalist did not pay the worker what his/her labor was worth, but withheld it for himself/herself. This difference between the value of the product and the wage paid to the worker Marx called "surplus value." He viewed the withholding of this "surplus value" as exploitation, and even theft.

The second element in capitalism of which Marx was critical was what he called “alienation.” Marx believed that people derive meaning in life from their work and from the commodities they produce. In a real sense, people are what they make.

When the capitalist extracts some of the value of the commodities a worker makes, the worker is alienated from his/her work...from part of himself/herself (DeKoster, 32). He also felt that the worker was alienated from society in that his/her work in a capitalist economy was not a “community” effort, but merely an act for individual survival.

Marx predicted that capitalist society would eventually collapse. This would be due first to the strain of ever more intense economic crises. Second, it would be due to the “increasing misery of the proletariat.” He believed that the bourgeois would become smaller and smaller, but richer and richer, and that the proletariat would become ever larger, but poorer and poorer. This “increasing misery” would drive the proletariat to revolt against the bourgeois and to take control of the means of production.

The Final Stage of History

In contrast to those whom they termed “utopian socialists,” Marx and Engels not only urged that society ought to be organized along socialist lines, but said that socialism and communism were inevitable! Marx believed he had discovered the scientific laws of history, and that the dialectic insured that socialism would inevitably arrive. This would not occur, however, until capitalist society had exhausted its potential for developing the means of production and for exploiting the proletariat. When that occurs, however, the working class will revolt. Marx anticipated that this would occur first in the most developed countries. Though he allowed for the possibility of a peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism, Marx believed a violent revolution was nearly inevitable. He did not conceive of capitalists surrendering their power without a fight. Lenin differed with Marx on this point by suggesting that capitalism would begin to disintegrate at its weakest link—in a country like Russia.

After the revolution, Marx envisioned a period of socialism under the oversight of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” During this stage, society would be cleansed of its individualistic elements, a process which could take decades. Marx saw this as an era of increasing democracy, characterized by openness and equality. Under Lenin, and particularly under Stalin and later under Mao-tse-Tung in China, it turned out to be anything but democratic and open!

Eventually, as society is purged of all its bourgeois elements, Marx foresaw the emergence of a purely communist society, in which all things would be held in common and in which there would be no need for state. Human nature would be cleansed of any selfish tendencies, and peace and prosperity would prevail. This change was described by Leon Trotsky in 1924 in the following words:

“Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser, and subtler, his body will become more harmonized, his movement more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise” (quoted in Lyon, 1841).

Another communist thinker, Leonid Ilyichov, put it this way.

“A builder of communism is a fully developed person, combining a rich intellect, moral integrity, mature aesthetic tastes, and physical perfection...people who have remade themselves...(with) new attitudes to labour and to one’s social obligations, (with) a new kind of discipline..., new moral principles...self-discipline, and moral purity” (Bockmuehl, 134).

Under communism, each person would contribute to society “according to his abilities,” and would receive “in accordance with his needs.” Marx and Engels even predicted the dissolution of the traditional family, the institution of a “legalized community of women,” and the care of all children by society (Noebel, 463-64).

Marxist Ethics

As atheists, Marxists deny any morality based on God’s character and commandments. They believe ethics are based on economics. Under capitalism, Marx taught that morality was simply a reflection of “bourgeois class interests.” For the Marxist, whatever advances communism is moral. Lenin stated: “Our morality is entirely subordinated to the interests of the class struggle of the proletariat” (Bales, 196). This means that lying, terror, and killing are moral if they advance the communist cause. It is no problem if millions of lives must be sacrificed now to promote the ultimate welfare of a future generation in a communist utopia.

Critique of Religion

Marx declared himself an atheist in the preface to his doctoral dissertation, endorsing the statement of David Hume, “In simple words, I hate the pack of gods” (Bales, 36). He embraced the idea of Feuerbach that God was simply the creation of people, who projected their own qualities onto an imaginary deity in whom they could find security. He shared the notion that only when people give up their belief in God will they truly be free.

Concerning the origin of religion, Engels said, “The first gods arose through the personification of natural forces...out of the many...gods there arose in the minds of men the idea of the one exclusive god” (Bales, 45). It is well known that Marx viewed religion as the “opium of the people.” He believed that religion was simply a tool of the bourgeois to make the proletariat feel content with their lot by hoping for a better life in heaven. Marx

said, “The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness” (Noebel, 70). Lenin said, “Every religious idea...is unutterable vileness...of the most dangerous kind” (Noebel, 73). In keeping with the notion of economic determinism, Marx believed that when the communist utopia arrived, people would no longer feel the need for religion. Religion would vanish, just as would the state.

As a result of these convictions about religion, Marxist states have always opposed religion. At times they have sought to actively destroy it. At other times they have sought to enlist the help of religious people in promoting their cause. They have always at least sought to control religion in their societies, believing that as the younger generation was educated in science, religion would fade away.

Approaching Marxists

Christian Critique of Marxism

Before offering some criticisms of Marxism, it must be acknowledged that some positive values can be ascribed to it. If it were otherwise, it would be hard to see why anyone would be attracted to it at all. First, it must be said that Marxism does not seek to do something about the oppressive conditions under which many people have worked and lived. Second, it recognizes that there have been abuses under the capitalist system (Geisler, 67).

The question is whether the solution it offers is one that should be endorsed. Marxists often point to the improved living conditions in socialist societies like China and the former Soviet Union. One must ask, however, at what great cost in terms of human lives? Also, how much better would the conditions in these countries be if they had benefited from a democratic system?

Following is a list of brief responses to the major teachings of Marxism drawn from many of the sources in the bibliography.

Philosophical Materialism

- Materialism ignores the evidence for humankind’s immaterial and immortal nature.
- It ignores the evidence that the universe had a beginning, and must have had a Creator.
- It accepts uncritically the theory of evolution (contrary evidence notwithstanding).
- It fails to explain how a material universe could be working toward a good purpose for humanity.

Economic Determinism

- It overstates the role played by economics in society while nearly ignoring the role played by ideas.
- If thought and ideas are the result of the economic system, how could the ideas of Marx and Engels have arisen in the midst of a capitalist system? And how could they change the system?

Dialectic Process

- The observation of a few isolated instances in the past of this process does not warrant the conclusion that the dialectic is an “immutable law” of history, and that the future is determined by it.
- If the dialectic is a “law” of history, why did the revolution not occur in an industrialized country?

Class Conflict

- Economic class is not always the most determinative influence in society. Race and religion are often stronger.
- Different economic classes often unite against a common external threat.
- Economic classes are not always cohesive. They often are fractured by other issues.

Critique of Capitalism

- Capitalist societies did not “self-destruct” as Marx predicted, nor did the proletariat grow more miserable. The conditions of the working class actually improved, due in part to enlightened social legislation.
- Marx overlooked the fact that there are many other things that go into the cost of commodities besides labor (e.g., the factory and tools, materials, training, sales, etc.)
- Marx overlooked the advantages of capitalism over socialism. For example, by encouraging competition, capitalism actually promotes cooperation. It encourages people to band together in ways that use their personal strengths. By allowing millions of people to make day-to-day economic decisions, it taps the knowledge of more than just a handful of central planners who try to manage an economy. It also channels selfish tendencies toward service, and rewards those who serve others best.

Socialism and Communism

- In a society where each is to receive in accordance with his/her need, who is to determine each person’s need? How do we know people won’t be just as selfish under communism as they are under capitalism?
- Instead of the state “withering away,” why is it that in Marxist societies the state has continued to expand?

Marxism and Christianity Contrasted

Marxism	Christianity
God	
Atheistic—there is no God. Matter is the fundamental reality.	Theistic—there is one Creator God. Reality consists of both matter and spirit.
Humanity's Nature	
Humanity has evolved from animals. Humanity's nature is determined by economic forces.	Humanity was created by God. Humanity is unique from the rest of creation because people are made in the image of God
Ethics	
There are no transcendent, moral absolutes. Whatever advances communism is right.	Moral absolutes are based on God's holy character and commandments.
The Problem	
Humanity is alienated from the fruit of our labors because of the distinction between the laborer and the owner.	Humanity has rebelled against God, and we reap the results of that sin through personal and social strife.
The Solution	
Humanity can be "saved" from alienation by eliminating private property and class distinctions. We can each become a "new person" through economic, political, and social means.	Humanity can be saved by trusting Christ. We can each become a "new person" through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 5:17).
Foundation for Hope	
Humanity's hope is to be found in political revolution.	Humanity's hope is to be found in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, who conquered death for us. Our hope will be fully realized when Jesus returns to rule over all the earth with justice.

- Rather than becoming a “classless society,” Marxist societies have created a new “elite” class of rulers and managers who constantly are fighting for power.
- Socialism collects too much power in the hands of a few with no “checks and balances.”
- Socialist societies have failed economically, except where they have reverted to a degree of free market practices.
- If the bourgeois will not give up power without a fight, how do we know the dictatorship of the proletariat will not also resist its relinquishing of power?
- The change in the economic system has failed to produce the “new man” who is devoid of selfish tendencies and lives only for humanity. If the Russian revolution had brought about a change in human nature, why did Stalin have to purge the most dedicated communists in his Politburo in the 1930s?

Morality

- If there is no transcendent standard for morality, how can we say people “ought” to promote communism?
- The idea that “the end justifies the means” has led to horrendous abuses of power and to the total disregard for individual human rights.

Critique of Religion

- Marx’s atheism ignores the evidence for God’s existence.
- The idea that religion developed from polytheism to monotheism is faulty. Even the most “primitive” cultures have a belief in a supreme God.

- Marxists are hard-pressed to explain why religion has persisted and even continued to grow in socialist societies, if religion is simply a reflection of the economic system.
- Marx's rejection of religion is based on its abuse, not on its true nature.
- Marx's rejection of Christianity ignores the historical evidence for its truthfulness.

Marxism's Most Basic Flaw

The fundamental flaw of Marxism is that it is built on a faulty view of human nature. Marxism teaches that aside from a few biological drives, there is no unchanging human nature. Human nature is determined by the prevailing economic system. Therefore, if the economic system is changed, human nature will change.

This doctrine is not only denied by Scripture, but it is also contradicted by the facts of history. Socialist societies have failed to produce any such change in human nature. This was acknowledged by Alexander Tsipko (consultant to the Communist Party Central Committee in the Soviet Union in 1988-89) in a 1989 article, in which he declared: "All our absurdities stem from our dogged refusal to see man as he really is..." (Hill, *Turbulent Times*, 63) Even Lenin decried to lack of change in socialist people in 1919, when he said: "The workers are building the new society without having turned themselves into new men who would be free from the dirt of the old world. They are still in it up to their knees" (Bockmuehl, 129).

Since the fall of the communist regime, the people of Russia have begun to see the effects of the lack of a religious foundation in their culture. In 1992, Gorbachev said, "Ignoring religious experience has meant great losses for society" (Yancey, *Christianity Today*, 19). Having removed any basis for morality by denying the existence of God, communism has left the people without any reason for pursuing an unselfish ethic. For example, a poll conducted by *Pravda* in the early 1990s revealed that people in Russia would sooner spend money on liquor than support needy children. The poll revealed that "70 percent of Russian parents would not allow their children to have contact with a disabled child; 80 percent would not give money to help; some advocated infanticide" (Yancey, 75). Marx's theory has been disproved by history.

Is There a Biblical Socialism/Communism?

Many have suggested that there is support for socialism in the Bible. Appeal is often made to the passages in Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35, which describe the early church as holding their possessions in common, and in 2 Corinthians 8:13-14, which encourage "equality" among Christians. These passages do encourage a spirit of sharing among Christians, and we should

heed them. But a few things should be kept in mind. First, the sharing was voluntary, not compulsory. Property was always deemed to be private until the owner chose to contribute it (cf. Acts 5:4). Second, while believers are encouraged to share with those in need, they are never told to share with those who are able but unwilling to work for their own livelihood (cf. 2 Thes. 3:10-12). It has also been emphasized that the testing of personal stewardship requires the possession of personal property. The aim of Marxism is to abolish personal property.

Principles of Ministry to Marxism

- Be prepared to acknowledge the abuses of many capitalists. People are greedy and selfish, and are not above using or abusing other people (cf. James 5:1-6).
- Be prepared to acknowledge the abuses of religion. People have abused religion to keep others "in their place" (cf., the endorsement of slavery and of racism by many Christians or former generations). But this does not mean the Bible supports such ideas.
- Be prepared to acknowledge the positive qualities of some Marxists. Some are motivated by compassion for the oppressed.
- Encourage, however, an objective evaluation of Marxism. Marx stressed the testing of ideas by practice. Do the facts support the theory? Has human nature changed due to a change in the economic system?
- Encourage the examination of the evidence for the existence of God, the historicity of Christ, and the reliability of the Bible.
- Marxists usually think Christianity is "unscientific." Point out that there is no conflict between objective science and biblical faith. If they are troubled by the conflict between creation and evolution, expose them to good material regarding this subject.
- Point to the practical effects of Christian faith in the lives of Christians, and to the changes Christians have effected in society. Christians have been responsible for the advancement of women, for the abolition of slavery, for the building of hospitals and orphanages, for the feeding of the hungry, for the training of workers, and for many social projects.
- Love them. Pray for them. Encourage them to study God's Word with you.

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