

# Accountability in World Politics<sup>1</sup>

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World politics has never been a democratic realm. Now, with interdependence and globalization prompting demands for global governance, the lack of global democracy has become an important public issue. Yet the domestic analogy is unhelpful since the conditions for electoral democracy, much less participatory democracy, do not exist on a global level. Rather than abandoning democratic principles, we should rethink our ambitions. First, we should emphasize, in our normative as well as our positive work, the role played by information in facilitating international cooperation and democratic discourse. Second, we should define feasible objectives such as limiting potential abuses of power, rather than aspiring to participatory democracy and then despairing of its impossibility. Third, we should focus as much on the powerful entities that are the core of the problem, including multinational firms and states, as on multilateral organizations, which often are the focus of criticism. Finally, we need to think about how to design a pluralistic accountability system for world politics that relies on a variety of types of accountability: supervisory, fiscal, legal, market, peer and reputational. A challenge for contemporary political science is to design such a system, which could promote both democratic values and effective international cooperation.

Much of the work for which you honour me with the Skytte Prize derives from my critique of a conventional view of the study of international relations that was more common 35 years ago than now. In this perspective, world politics is essentially a matter of interstate competition, which breaks out occasionally in warfare. The role of students of world politics, in this view, is to understand the causes of war and the conditions of peace. Without denying the importance of this subject, I have sought to redefine the study of world politics by broadening its scope. I have sought to analyse transnational relations and interdependence, and to explore the conditions under which institutionalized or legalized cooperation takes place among states. I have also investigated the implications of such cooperation for outcomes that we care about, ranging from the maintenance of alliances, to security against terrorism to environmental protection.

The most comprehensive statement of my perspective on world politics is in my 1984 book, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World*

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*Political Economy* (Keohane 1984). My argument builds explicitly on realism, particularly Kenneth Waltz's neorealism (Waltz 1979), but goes beyond it. States do not typically cooperate out of altruism or empathy with the plight of others, nor for the sake of pursuing what they conceive as 'international interests'. They seek wealth and security for their own people, and search for power as a means to these ends. The key to my argument is the 'functional theory of international regimes', according to which states build international regimes in order to promote mutually beneficial cooperation. The international trade regime of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), now the World Trade Organization (WTO), is the closest real-world example to the model that I construct. In my view, international regimes – clusters of principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures – reduce transaction costs for states – that is, the costs of making and enforcing agreements. They also alleviate problems of asymmetrical information and enhance the credibility of states' commitments. Their existence can be explained in terms of self-interest; yet the resulting institutions exert an impact on state policies by changing the costs and benefits of various alternatives, and over time have often unforeseen effects.

It is important to note that although my view of world politics is based on rational-choice theory, and relies heavily on microeconomic analogies, it is not inconsistent with what has become known as 'constructivist' thinking in world politics. According to constructivists, interests are derived not merely from material identities, but are also constituted by ideas and norms (Jepperson et al. 1996, 53; Wendt 1999, 113 ff.). As Judith Goldstein and I have written, this view 'is irrefutable in the abstract and reminds researchers to investigate not just what strategies are devised to attain interests but how preferences are formed and how identities are shaped' (Goldstein & Keohane 1993, 5–6).

Constructivism and my version of rationalist theory are not only compatible, but are also in some ways complementary. Both rationalism and constructivism focus on the beliefs of agents *prior to* the strategic calculus that these agents employ. In game theory, it is important to understand what beliefs are common knowledge; 'constructivism analyzes discourses and practices that continuously recreate what rationalists refer to as common knowledge' (Katzenstein et al. 1999, 41). The point is that although their languages are different, rationalism and constructivism have more in common than stylizations of them as containing different ontologies would suggest. In my view, students of world politics should be seeking to integrate their insights rather than pitting them against one another in a gladiatorial contest. At any rate, that is the spirit of my inquiry in this article into issues of accountability – which can be well-understood only by comprehending both the strategic interactions between those in authority and those to whom they are supposedly accountable ('principals' and 'agents' in rational-choice language), and

the underlying norms and identities that define what is considered to be appropriate behaviour for global rule-making (March & Olson 1999). My argument about international cooperation and institutions emphasizes that information is a *variable*. It is not just that world politics is uncertain; institutionalization can provide information, increase credibility and generate focal points, thus reducing uncertainty.

Recently, I have been trying to understand the normative implications of the patterns of complex interdependence and institutionalized cooperation that my work describes. Since information is at the core of my positive theory of international regimes, it makes sense that it should be central to my normative theory as well. Since I am a liberal democrat by conviction, I have been particularly interested in the information that is available to the governed in democratic societies – that is, in issues of accountability. To what extent can democratic principles of accountability be applied to world politics, and what are the implications – for our own actions – of the answer to this question?

## The Democracy Dilemma

An accountability relationship is one in which an individual, group or other entity makes demands on an agent to report on his or her activities, and has the ability to impose costs on the agent. Democratic accountability within a constitutional system is a relationship in which power-wielders are accountable to broad publics through a variety of means including elections with a universal franchise. A system of democratic accountability in world politics would be one in which power-wielders would have to report to people whose actions they profoundly affected, and be subject to sanctions from them (Held 2004, chapter 6). For someone who believes in liberal democracy like me, it would be pleasant to imagine that such a system could be constructed for world politics.

Unfortunately, such a vision would be utopian in the sense of illusory – impossible of realization under realistically foreseeable conditions. There is no coherent global government and none is likely to emerge within the next few decades. There is a loose global civil society, with many voluntary groups, but there is no global public in a sense parallel to the concept of a Swedish public or an American public. A global public requires two conditions. First, it requires a political structure to define who was entitled to participate, and on what issues. Second, a global public requires a large ‘imagined community’ – people who share a sense of common destiny and are in the habit of communicating with one another on issues of public policy. The fate of the European constitutional treaty shows that even in the European Union, such a sense of common destiny is not yet widespread.

So we cannot resort to an analogy with domestic politics. Should we then abandon the notion of accountability at a global level? Doing so would be to accept as a fact that international organizations are undemocratic bureaucracies, as Dahl (1999) has characterized them. If we were to accept the inherently undemocratic nature of international organizations, we would be left with two alternatives, both unpalatable. We could accept arbitrary rule, with attendant abuses of power, at the global level as the price of managing interdependence and resign ourselves to the demise of democratic practices as globalization proceeds. In this case, we could put our hopes in governmental networks of elites (Slaughter 2004), 'clubs' of negotiators working on specific issues (Keohane & Nye 2001) and wise arbitration by experts. The WTO, writ large, would provide the vision of our future. The second alternative would be to demand the maintenance of national sovereignty, at least for constitutional democracies, on the premise that democracy can flourish only within the boundaries of a nation-state (Rabkin 2005). On both the Right and the Left, voices have been raised to limit, in the name of national democracy, one or another form of globalization.

I am not willing to accept either horn of this dilemma. Even institutions established with the best intentions in the world can foster corruption – as we have seen recently in the United Nations Secretariat – or oppression. The political theorist Judith Shklar enunciated what she called the 'liberalism of fear', and stated memorably that 'no liberal ever forgets that governments are coercive' (Shklar 1984, 244). So extension of power without constraints on abuses of power (i.e. procedures for accountability) is unacceptably dangerous. On the other hand, the world is increasingly interdependent with respect to our personal physical security as well as economically, socially, militarily and ecologically. To combine interdependence with lack of governance is to create an explosive and deadly compound – as deadly as suicide bombs. Trusting national states to manage interdependence without international institutions is like trusting a four-year-old boy to play with real guns. Since neither of these alternatives makes sense in the twenty-first century, we must, I believe, figure out ways to gain benefits from governance at a global level while protecting ourselves against its abuse. In other words, we need urgently to seek innovative ways to hold potential abusers of power, at a global level, to account; otherwise, we risk discrediting global governance and fostering a reversion to national sovereignty, with disastrous consequences for cooperation, for peace, and for our own prosperity and personal security.

## Accountability and Abuses of Power

At the global level it is difficult to answer two fundamental questions about accountability. First, what constitutes an abuse of power, and why? Second,

who is entitled to hold power-wielders accountable, and why? We need to recognize that people dislike being held accountable. Everyone seeks to hold others accountable, but few of us really want to be held accountable ourselves. The reason is that accountability is a *power relationship*. To be held accountable is to have one's autonomy and one's power over others, constrained. Since few of us like to be held accountable, we must expect leaders of organizations – whose drive for power is greater than that of the average person – to resist accountability, especially when they can do so without jeopardizing other goals. Establishing accountability relationships necessarily implies conflict.

With this general sketch of accountability at a global level in mind, I will next distinguish between external and internal accountability, and discuss accountability in comparison with other ways to limit abuses of power. Then I will outline various elements of what I call a '*pluralistic accountability system*'. Accountability can be internal or external. The most common type of internal accountability occurs through delegation. People or groups create organizations that depend on those who created them for financial support, legitimacy or other resources. Corporate CEOs are responsible to their boards of directors, who are responsible to stockholders; in congregational churches, pastors are accountable to the church members, in episcopal churches, to presiding bishops. External accountability is quite different. Where external accountability is at issue, organizations are held accountable not to those who delegated power to them, but to those affected by their actions. The World Bank is internally accountable to its rich and powerful shareholders; but we might think it should also be accountable to poor farmers in developing countries. If the world were a liberal democratic state and the World Bank an agent of the government of this state, the internal and external models would be fused. Through democratic elections, people affected by its actions would be able to choose between candidates with alternative platforms on what the Bank's policies should be, but in the world as it is, this prospect is unrealistic. States with funds are not going to provide them unless they have substantial control over their use. We could preach global democracy to the G8 until we were exhausted, but it would change nothing. Yet it is external accountability that matters most to us in normative terms. Only experts will worry much about whether the boards of the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (IMF) can control the executive heads or staffs of these organizations. People outside the United States are less concerned with limitations from American public opinion on the President with the effectiveness of constraints on the United States from the rest of the world. Does the United States have to display 'a decent respect to the opinions of mankind', in the words of the Declaration of Independence?

Consider the entities conventionally held accountable on a transnational basis. The most prominent, judging from demonstrations, press coverage and

even scholarly articles, are major intergovernmental organizations, including the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), World Bank, the IMF and the WTO. These organizations do not meet democratic standards of accountability as applied in the best-functioning democracies of our era. Their internal accountability is often very weak, as indicated by the recent oil-for-food scandals at the UN. The UN secretariat has been supervised by multiple states, most of which have little financial stake in efficiency and often a significant stake in placing their nationals, often incompetent or troublesome ones, in the UN bureaucracy. The states have their own interests, leading them to overlook irregularities or even corruption.

The external accountability gaps are even greater. Indeed, many poor people affected by the policies of the IMF, World Bank and the WTO have no ability to hold these organizations accountable. Nevertheless, many people feel that these organizations should be externally as well as internally accountable, and many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) purport to speak for the poor. One result of their endeavours is that the decision-making processes of the IMF, World Bank and WTO have become more remarkably transparent. Indeed, in transparency they now compare well to the decision-making processes of most governments, even some democratic governments – and of many of the NGOs that demand transparency!

When the processes of major multilateral organizations are not transparent, the chief source of non-transparency is governmental pressure for confidentiality. Their leaders spend much of their time seeking to persuade constituencies that the organizations are actually both constructive and responsive. These organizations are therefore anything but ‘out of control bureaucracies’, accountable to nobody. They are much too weak to be so arrogant. Indeed, the real problem of external accountability seems to me quite different. The IMF, World Bank and WTO are chiefly accountable to the governments whose support they need – not necessarily to the people most affected by their actions. NGOs claim to speak for these people, but in fact heavily over-represent liberal, professional elites in the rich countries. These NGOs demand accountability, but they are not even representative of dominant opinion in many of their own countries – such as the United States. The NGOs are therefore weak compared to governments. Yet when the NGOs lose the battle due to their institutionally weak positions, they condemn the organizations as ‘unaccountable’, rather than the governments – which then weakens the perceived legitimacy of the multilateral institutions in the eyes of members of national publics who should most support them. The discourse is therefore perverse, strengthening the hand of those, such as the Right Wing in the United States, who seek to ignore the views of people elsewhere in the world.

What the controversies also indicate is that accountability is a distributional issue. The issue is not so much: are these organizations accountable? The

answer to that question is 'yes'. They are accountable to the states that authorized their creation and that provide financial support. The real issue is: are they accountable to the right groups? NGOs make a normative claim for accountability to groups that are affected or for accountability to principles such as 'sustainable development' or 'human rights'. These are serious issues, but they are not so much issues of 'lack of accountability' as issues of 'accountability to whom?' Different types of accountability favour different accountability-holders. Once again, accountability is largely a matter of power.

Why is accountability important? Essentially, in my view, accountability helps prevent abuses of power. A critic might say, however, that it is a category mistake to talk about accountability in world politics. The only realistic way to limit abuses of power in world politics, in this view, would be to impose coercive constraints on the potential abuser: to rely on the balance of power, or on economic constraints. There is something in this objection. Not all entities whose actions we may fear in world politics can be held accountable in a meaningful sense. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church is deliberately structured as a closed hierarchy to resist human external accountability. Conversely, mass religious movements, whether Islamic or Christian evangelical, are difficult to hold accountable since they are so decentralized. Who is to be held accountable? At the extreme, al-Qaeda cannot be held accountable by their potential victims since al-Qaeda does not share values or even a common normative language with its victims. Sometimes, in world politics, limiting abuses of power requires the use of legitimate force, or the wielding of material resources controlled by states. Such limitations on power should not be confused with accountability. Nevertheless, accountability relationships, when institutionalized, regularize restraints on power without imposing the tremendous costs involved in the application of coercion. If feasible, they are therefore a superior means of preventing abuses of power. Consider two examples of powerful entities whose potential abuses of power could be limited either through coercion or through accountability relationships.

### *Multinational Corporations*

Multinational corporations are held internally accountable, with more or less success, to their shareholders, who authorize action and provide support. Yet their actions also have enormous effects on other people. Multinational corporations should not be demonized – indeed, studies in various issue areas show that brand-name corporations often act in more socially responsible ways than anonymous local firms in the same industry (e.g. sweatshops, tankers, environment). However, when they act only in their own interests and those of their shareholders, they may do enormous damage. One response would be to weaken them, but for one or a few states to attempt this strategy would probably be unsuccessful, and for many to do so could

well destroy the economic and technological benefits that size and global integration can bring. Arrangements for accountability could provide early warning of problems, institutionalizing what Albert Hirschman referred to as 'voice'. They could also impose moderate reputational costs on corporations for anti-social behaviour, which could have the effect of leading the firms themselves to institutionalize controls to avoid this, and in the process to become routinely more sensitive to the interests of people outside the firm itself. Conversely, firms that were sensitive to the public interest would gain reputational benefits. The UN's 'Global Compact' seeks to institutionalize relationships between the UN and major multinational firms that will improve accountability and reward firms for being responsible corporate citizens (Ruggie 2004). It remains to be seen how effective these arrangements will be.

### *Powerful States*

The doctrine of sovereignty has traditionally served to protect states from external accountability. It has not prevented occasional resort to war and other coercive measures as means of control, with enormously destructive results. Multilateral institutions are designed to make states accountable to each other, if not to outsiders, by institutionalizing a pattern of questioning and making it possible to withhold approval from coercive actions. The result will not be harmony, but it can be the emergence of patterns of cooperation that benefit all or most participants and prevent a spiral of misperceptions and misjudgements that can lead to war. The problem, of course, is that extremely powerful states seem virtually immune from accountability if they refuse to accept it. The United States is of course the chief case in point, demanding more rope with which to hang itself, as in Iraq. On any given issue, the United States can typically act unilaterally, dismissing demands for accountability. However, as I will argue below, even the United States needs to worry about its reputation.

## A Pluralistic Accountability System for World Politics

I do not have a normatively satisfactory solution for these failures of external accountability. In my view, the unevenness of arrangements for external accountability is caused by the power asymmetries of world politics and cannot therefore be rectified by any academic formula. Yet we do need to recognize that non-electoral mechanisms of external accountability do exist, although they are often weak. They need to be strengthened. Not surprisingly, the issues are easiest with respect to formal intergovernmental organizations, since two accountability mechanisms for these institutions are already in



place. *Supervisory mechanisms* exist by which those entities that delegated powers – states or larger-scale multilateral organizations – supervise the exercise of those powers. And *fiscal mechanisms* exist, ensuring that the organization will respond to its supervisors for fear of having funding cut off. The various measures now being taken by the United Nations to ensure that its financial procedures provide for more accountability reflect the impact of supervisory and fiscal mechanisms.

*Legal accountability mechanisms* are expanding in world politics. The legalization of world trade makes national leaders with responsibility for trade policy accountable to tribunals applying an expanding body of law. If the International Criminal Court succeeds in establishing jurisdiction over accused war criminals, it will constitute another expansion of legal accountability mechanisms. Insofar as those who control those mechanisms act responsibly, and are themselves accountable to others, such an expansion promises to create a set of welcome restraints on the ability of national leaders to commit abuses of human rights.

Corporations and governments can both be held accountable by *markets*. The processes by which financial markets constrain the actions of democratic governments are inherently undemocratic: almost by definition, financial markets are controlled by the rich. Yet democracies have strong tendencies to put future generations at risk, or under debt burdens, for the sake of gratifying current voters and interest groups. By increasing the costs of debt beyond a certain point, financial markets may constrain this particular abuse of the power of adults now over succeeding generations. Accountability to consumer markets, on the other hand, is inherently more democratic. It does not imply accountability to the poor, but may involve accountability to a transnational middle class. Nike, Coca-Cola and MacDonald's all have to be concerned about the possibility of consumer boycotts, even if such boycotts are discussed more often than they are implemented. So do Exxon-Mobil and British Petroleum: it is not accidental that tankers owned by brand-name corporations are safer, on average, than those owned by anonymous entities (Mitchell 1994).

Two other forms of accountability may exert some impact even on powerful states. *Peer accountability* refers to ways in which organizations may criticize the operations of similar organizations, often through multilateral organizations. National financial policies are subject to criticism by other states, directly and in the context of organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Bank for International Settlements. Governmental networks of security regulators, standard-setters and accounting experts collectively develop 'best practice' standards that are often costly to disavow or evade (Slaughter 2004). The EU has multiple processes to facilitate for its Member States both criticism of each other's policies and the sharing of information about best practices.

Finally, reputation matters, so we can speak of *reputational accountability*. To be accepted into the right ‘clubs’, one has to behave in appropriate ways. Such a process of socialization is often conflictual, but over time its impact can be enormous. China’s efforts to change its practices in order to be accepted into the world economy provide fascinating indicators of how reputational accountability works, as well as its limitations. So do the efforts of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to restore America’s reputation as a cooperative member of what Hedley Bull called ‘international society’. Her efforts are indicated not only by her fence-mending trip to Europe but by American acceptance of a central role for the UN in tsunami relief efforts, its agreement that the International Criminal Court may have jurisdiction over crimes of genocide in the Sudan, and its greater cooperation with others in dealing with North Korea and Iran. Reputation is a form of ‘soft power’, defined as ‘the ability to shape the preferences of others’ (Nye 2004, 5). No intelligent statesperson is likely to discard it lightly.

When we evaluate institutions – states, NGOs or multilateral organizations – one of our criteria should be whether they provide accurate information about their own processes as well as about their accomplishments. Accountability is only possible with information, much of which has to be provided by the organization in question. Hiding information is endemic to organizations, even when their leaders do not engage in systematic deceit. It is not a trivial standard, therefore, to demand truth-telling and transparency as a condition for legitimacy. Taking this standard seriously would have made many well-meaning people more sceptical during the Cold War of the Soviet Union, which would have been well-founded in view of subsequent discoveries about such matters as environmental degradation and biological weapons programmes. It would make us critical of the UN bureaucracy now. And it would make us even more critical of the current United States government.

Institutions should be judged not merely by their transparency, but by the *epistemic quality* of our understanding of them. Too much information, without coherent interpretation, is merely confusing noise. We also need the capacity to interpret information intelligently, which entails the ability to ask pointed questions of power-holders and to demand answers. For that capacity, we need a vibrant global civil society, with many groups, from different perspectives, investigating and criticizing the actions of states, multilateral institutions and other powerful entities. A pluralistic accountability system will depend on many kinds of accountability: supervisory, fiscal, legal, market, peer and reputational. In world politics, such forms of accountability will not come from a centralized hierarchy, but from a pluralistic, often discordant system of NGOs and networks among them.

Often the fragmentation of world politics is lamented because it implies a lack of well-structured, coherent global governance. Yet from an informational standpoint such fragmentation is beneficial since it ensures that Gramscian

structures of hegemonic discourse and consequent false consciousness are very unlikely to emerge. Too many actors, with both different normative perspectives and interests, can exercise voice in the world. The global media, including the new Internet-based media, are capable of transmitting a huge volume and variety of messages. The results often appear chaotic, and there may be no way to focus and aggregate concerns about the behaviour of power-wielders. Yet it is less likely in world politics than in a more hierarchical structure that nefarious behaviour will continue to be hidden, or its discussion repressed. The reaction of the American public to human rights abuses by the United States at Abu Graib and Guantanamo was remarkably muted, presumably by a combination of patriotism and fear. The stronger global reaction kept these issues alive, and even made them resonate more among the American public than would have been the case had the United States been closed to outside influences.

The most effective institutions for enhancing global accountability may well be those that create ripple effects within powerful democratic states. If states were monolithic, it would be much more difficult to hold them accountable. Yet when a powerful democracy engages in behaviour that is censured by people in other societies, some members of the democracy will be affected. The mechanisms may include persuasion, and will almost certainly include bolstering. In other words, opponents of the state's policies, in a minority at home, will be provided with arguments and moral support by the outside reaction. Furthermore, some other people, who might not be normatively moved by the criticism, will worry about its effects on the reputation and soft power of the state, and may therefore act to check abuses that they otherwise would have overlooked. As in so much else in world politics, the interaction between inter-state behaviour and domestic politics is crucial for the outcomes that eventually result.

## Conclusion

If we are to work effectively to improve accountability in world politics, we need to abandon the domestic analogy: the belief that meaningful accountability has to be democratic, entailing popular elections. We need to devise and strengthen mechanisms of accountability that are feasible, given the continuing power asymmetries of world politics. Although the world today does not have a global public, those of us involved in transnational conversations and concerned about global institutions can readily talk to one another. Democrats around the world can draw on common democratic values that have become widely, although not universally, accepted in principle, albeit less realized in practice. In the age of the Internet, we have the great advantage over previous generations that information is much easier to discover and harder to conceal. The

decentralization and diversity of world politics make transparency easier to achieve since a variety of voices can express themselves, and these voices can be heard at low cost. No single state or coalition of states can prevent the organization and operation of a networked system of pluralistic accountability, with the potential to limit abuses of power.

I believe that people committed to democracy and international cooperation around the world should be taking advantage of the opportunities we have to build, piece by piece, a pluralistic accountability system in world politics. I also believe that political science has a special responsibility to help construct institutions that would both be accountable and that would hold other powerful entities accountable. We could do much more as a discipline to integrate our descriptive and normative work by posing ourselves questions about how to design international regimes that are effective, relatively efficient and legitimate.

Legitimacy has two dimensions: sociological and normative. Political scientists have tools for assessing the sociological legitimacy of institutions: the degree to which they are accepted by relevant constituencies as having the right to rule. Political theory contains substantial resources for assessing normative legitimacy: whether institutions have the right to rule according to a coherent and defensible set of normative principles. Normative legitimacy requires a consistent pattern of institutional outputs that meet both epistemic and performance tests. The epistemic dimension of legitimacy means that for powerful institutions to be legitimate, they need to generate correct information, both about the problems they purport to solve and about their own practices. They need to be transparent and accountable, and located in the context of independent monitoring agents that can interrogate their behaviour. The performance dimension of legitimacy – what Fritz Scharpf (1999) calls ‘output legitimacy’ – is also crucial since institutions are created, and their costs borne, to solve problems. Political scientists are in a good position to help design more effective institutions and assess their normative quality. Doing so is a task worthy of our best efforts in the twenty-first century.

#### NOTE

1. This article is an amplification of my Skytte Prize lecture, presented at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, on 1 October 2005. Parts of it draw on two published papers: Keohane (2003) and Grant and Keohane (2005).

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