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***Brave New World* and the Scientific Dictatorship: Utopia or Dystopia?**

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Abstract • The essay asks whether Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) is really a dystopia as its author presented it in his letters, or a utopia in which god-like men methodically arrange their own affairs, re-creating Eden on Earth and bringing social harmony and stability to pass. We explore Huxley's elitist background, his eugenicist theories, and his personal tastes in drugs and sex to discover that there is nothing really in the futuristic society depicted in *Brave New World* that its author would have felt uncomfortable with; even the punishments it metes out to dissenters would have resembled rewards for intellectuals like Huxley. By comparing the novel with Huxley's later fiction and non-fiction, we conclude that *Brave New World* is one of many speculative narratives produced in the early twentieth century designed to covertly promote the idea of the World State and act as a vehicle for the social Darwinist agenda of the scientific elite.

Keywords • Aldous Huxley; *Brave New World*; Utopia/Dystopia; Eugenics; Social Engineering; Futurism; Elitism; Globalism

Ledizioni 

Brave New World and the Scientific Dictatorship: Utopia or Dystopia?¹

Nic Panagopoulos

In *Brave New World* (1932), Huxley describes the “scientific dictatorship” (*BNWR* 179) he foresaw ruling the world in 2540 AD. In this futuristic regime, the humanities are at a discount: art and literature are forbidden, as is history and traditional religion. As Mustapha Mond, the Resident Controller for Western Europe, explains:

“History [...] is bunk.” He waved his hand; and it was as though, with an invisible feather whisk, he had brushed [...] some spiderwebs, and they were Thebes and Babylon and Cnossos and Mycenae. Whisk. Whisk—and where was Odysseus, where was Job, where were Jupiter and Gotama and Jesus? Whisk—and those specks of antique dirt called Athens and Rome, Jerusalem and the Middle Kingdom—all were gone. Whisk—the place where Italy had been was empty. Whisk, the cathedrals; whisk, whisk, King Lear and the Thoughts of Pascal. Whisk, Passion; whisk, Requiem; whisk, Symphony; whisk. ... (*BNW* 38)

All these high cultural achievements have been replaced by mock-religious hymn services culminating in public orgies (“orgy-porgies”) and a hallucinogen drug (“soma”) which is non-addictive and purchasable on demand. The only art available to the citizens of the World State are the so-called “feelies,” a futuristic version of “the movies” which include physical stimulation, similar to modern-day cyber-sex. Needless to say the subject matter is always pornographic. But it is not only art that is considered dangerous for public consumption in *Brave New World*; science too is viewed as a powerful social engineering tool and under strict state control. As Mond says,

all our science is just a cookery book, with an orthodox theory of cooking that nobody’s allowed to question, and a list of recipes that mustn’t be added to except by special permission from the head cook. I’m the head cook now. (177)

In his book-length essay, *Literature and Science* (1963), Aldous Huxley argues passionately against the dichotomy between the arts and the sciences and proposes that the gap between them be bridged.² However, what is the relationship between the so-called “two cultures” to be in today’s interdisciplinary world and what status is to be afforded to each? One possible answer to these questions comes in a lecture that Huxley gave in March 1962, at the Berkeley Language Center, entitled “The Ultimate Revolution.” In this lecture which compares the crude coercive techniques of the past with the advanced brainwashing

¹ A version of this paper was given at the New Humanities Seminar, “Forebodings, Visions, and Critiques: Speculative Fiction and the Sciences from the 1890s to the 1930s,” organized by Professor Richard Ambrosini, 15 March 2013, Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, University Roma Tre.

² It is worth noting that Huxley’s work bears the same title as Matthew Arnold’s essay by the same name published in 1882 where Huxley’s maternal uncle takes issue with his grandfather, the famous zoologist Thomas Henry Huxley, for considering literature a source of education that is outdated in the modern scientific environment.

tools available to the modern demagogue, Huxley argues that “There will be, in the next generation or so, a pharmacological method of making people love their servitude.” The phrase “making people love their servitude” runs throughout this lecture as well as in other, non-fiction works of Huxley’s, such as *Brave New World Revisited* (1958). Presumably Huxley is arguing against this, but things may not be so straightforward. For one thing, the moderator of this lecture from the University of California introduces Huxley as having “recently returned from a conference at the Institute for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara where the discussion focused on the development of new techniques by which to control and direct human behavior.” (“The Ultimate Revolution” 00:11-00:23). But why, one might ask, should a so-called “Institute for the study of Democratic Institutions” be exploring new techniques to make people “love their servitude”?

In “The Ultimate Revolution,” Huxley describes an experiment he was privy to in UCLA involving electrodes inserted into rats’ brains which the rats themselves could stimulate by pressing on a bar. When the electrode was planted in the pleasure center of the brain, the rats would lose interest in food and sex, and press the bar as many as 18,000 times a day. But what Huxley found most remarkable was when the electrode was planted between the pain and pleasure centres of the rats’ brains. As he explains,

The result was a kind of mixture of the most wonderful ecstasy and like being on the rack at the same time. And you would see the rats sort of looking at the bar and sort of saying ‘To be or not to be? That is the question.’ Finally [they] would approach ... and go back ... and would wait some time before pressing the bar again, yet [they] would always press it again. This was the extraordinary thing. (36.50-37.27)

Huxley is pointing out that what a physiologist can do with rats, a would-be dictator can do with human subjects because our nervous systems are very similar and equally susceptible to outside control. Huxley’s tone of voice at this point in the lecture suggests that he was fascinated by this experiment because it implies the possibility of the scientist playing God with other creatures and unfailingly making them do whatever he wants. This in itself is perhaps not surprising given that Huxley had originally intended to become a physician, but was obstructed from doing so by an eye infection during adolescence that left him virtually blind. His reductive way of thinking about emotional states in this lecture, however, equates human beings with laboratory animals, and culminates in the famous quote from Hamlet, implying perhaps that culture is little more than an enormous self-deception. Also, most tellingly, the novelist uses a quote from Shakespeare to elucidate a scientific experiment—rather than the reverse—revealing where his priorities lie. When Huxley thinks of art, he is thinking of it primarily in terms of “techne,” the Greek word that also incorporates within it the idea of “craft” and “technical skill.” And this is the underlying link he sees between the arts and sciences, that they are different means of controlling the environment—different types of power. The difference is that science is a far more powerful “techne” than art, in this respect, whereas art is also seen to fall under the category of cultural illusion, very much like organized religion.

In the same lecture, Huxley goes on to describe another experiment that he read about in *Scientific American* where chickens were fitted with electrodes which would enable a miniature radio receiver in their brains to be stimulated from a distance using remote control. As he explains, the chickens would...

...run about in the barnyard and you could press a button and this particular area of the brain to which the electrode has been screwed down to would be stimulated. You would get this

fantastic phenomena, where a sleeping chicken would jump up and run about, or an active chicken would suddenly sit down and go to sleep. (38.15-38.38)

This is a scenario, of course, that has become possible to apply to human beings today using microchip implants, for example, and although Huxley concludes by saying that the “whole picture of the absolute control of the drives is terrifying,” as with the case of the rat experiment, it is more a sense of exhilaration that he seems to express. Indeed, although he admits that by using such means, human beings can be made “to love a state of things by which any reasonable and decent human standard they ought not to love” (34.36), he does not explore the moral issued raised by the use of such technologies for social control. He merely opines that this is “perfectly possible” and leaves it at that.

Although *Brave New World* presents itself as a piece of fantasy literature, it reflects many of its author’s prime concerns. David Bradshaw tells us that Huxley’s work consistently expressed his resentment towards what he saw as the “vulgarity and perversity of mass civilization” (xx) as well as the fear of Americanization which was prominent in Europe at the time. This would explain the “sex-hormone chewing gum” as well as the many curvaceous, or “pneumatic,” blondes found in *Brave New World*. It would also explain why the secular deity worshipped by the citizens of the World State is called “Our Ford,”³ since the famous car manufacturer typified for many the corporate culture and cutting-edge technology that America seemed to represent at the time. The name which Huxley gives to the controller in *Brave New World*, “Mustapha Mond,” derives from another prominent industrialist of the era, Sir Alfred Mond, the owner of the state-of-the-art Billingham chemical plant which Huxley visited in the late twenties and was inspired to write the book. Only, in the fictional version, it’s not just cars or chemicals that are mass produced on conveyor belts using the latest technology. Human beings, too, are genetically and socially engineered to fit one of five distinct classes, with different mental and physical attributes in keeping with their social function.

Brave New World appears to be precariously and uncomfortably poised between dystopia, “a bad place,” and utopia, a “good place that doesn’t exist,” as Margaret Atwood defines the terms in her Introduction to the 2007 edition of the novel (vii-viii).⁴ For an epigraph, Huxley chose a quote from the Russian philosopher, Nicolas Berdiaeff, who wrote:

Utopias seem to be much more achievable than we formerly believed them to be. Now we find ourselves presented with another alarming question: how do we prevent utopias from coming into existence? [...] Utopias are possible. Life tends towards the formation of utopias. Perhaps a new century will begin, a century in which intellectuals and the privileged will dream of ways to eliminate utopias and return to a non-utopic society less “perfect” and more free.

This suggests that the novel constitutes a warning to humanity about what lies in store so that, forewarned, it may be forearmed and resist the approaching scientific dictatorship.

³ It is an interesting coincidence that during the Spring Semester of 1962, Huxley visited the University of California, Berkeley, in the capacity of Ford Research Professor (“The Ultimate Revolution” 00.07).

⁴ Laurence Davis has also argued that the categories of utopian and dystopian fiction are always to some degree overlapping (“At Play in the Fields of Our Ford: Utopian Dystopianism in Atwood, Huxley, and Zamyatin”).

This also seems to be the general tenor of the non-fiction work, *Brave New World Revisited*, wherein Huxley attempts to review his earlier novel as regards the accuracy of its predictions and which concludes with a chapter entitled “What can be Done?” Not much, as it turns out. Huxley himself referred to *Brave New World* as a “negative utopia,” and claimed that he wrote it in revolt against what he called the “horror of the Wellsian Utopia,” although it’s not quite clear what he meant by this (Smith 348). In which sense is Huxley’s utopia intended to be different from Wells and what exactly is Huxley rebelling against in the work of Wells?

Shaw’s Fabian Socialism and Well’s optimistic futurism, discredited by the ravages of WWI, also seem to have motivated the writing of *Brave New World* as a kind of parody of such works as *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *Men Like Gods* (1923).⁵ Yet, in other instances, Huxley downplays the seriousness of the project: in a letter to Mrs. A. J. Goldsmith, for example, he claims that he had “been having a little fun pulling the leg of H. G. Wells,” but then “got caught up in the excitement of [his] own ideas” (Heje 100). The ironic title of the novel, taken from Miranda’s famous speech in *The Tempest*, could also serve to describe the Savage’s culture shock in the novel, but how ironic is this phrase in Shakespeare and Huxley? Regarding the former, the love-struck Miranda is expressing wonder at the sight of so many men, having known only her father on the island, while the Savage who has lived all his life on the Indian Reservation is similarly awe-struck at the sight of the New Worldians, especially the “pneumatic”⁶ Lenina Crowne, whom he develops a crush on. Both characters are equally justified in their admiration, given their lack of experience and the enormous contrast between their previous state, and that in which they now respectively find themselves. Moreover, the architects of both “brave worlds”—the wizard Prospero, and the future controllers of the scientific dictatorship—undoubtedly deserve praise for their achievements, having managed to create order out of chaos. Thus, we may ask, does not *Brave New World*, like *The Tempest*, portray a successful social engineering project, where god-like men methodically arrange their own affairs, re-create Eden on Earth, bringing social harmony and stability to a troubled world? Viewed from this perspective, is *Brave New World* really the dystopia that most readers have taken it for? Let us look at the evidence.

In many regards, the novel subverts some of the nineteenth century’s most hallowed institutions. As Margaret Atwood points out, “The word ‘mother’—so thoroughly worshipped by the Victorians—has become a shocking obscenity,” while “Victorian religiosity has been channeled into the worship of an invented deity” (x). “Our Ford” is a parody of “Our Lord,” and the societal norms which are provocatively reversed in *Brave New World* are more generally Christian rather than merely Victorian. But Huxley was never much of a fan of Christianity, anyway, and following his drug-induced visionary experiences in later life, ultimately subscribed to a New Age type of mysticism derived from the Vedas. So he may not have been so averse to the banning of the Bible in *Brave New World*, even if he may have perhaps resented the suppression of Shakespeare. Of course, controllers like Mond see no fault in stocking such forbidden literature in their private libraries, and could conceivably even listen to Mozart on the sly, if they so wished—activities strictly out of bounds for the lower-caste citizens of the World State. But, as

⁵ See letter to Mrs. Kethevan Roberts, 18 May 1931 (Smith 390).

⁶ It is quite ironic that this adjective which means “spiritual” in Greek is used to mean “busty” in *Brave New World*.

David Bradshaw points out, “Huxley was born into a family which had only recently become synonymous with the intellectual aristocracy” (vii). His grandfather was the famous zoologist T. H. Huxley who collaborated with Darwin on the theory of evolution and mentored H. G. Wells who would in turn tutor Aldous and his brother, Julian. The latter would become the first Director General of UNESCO and a founding member of the WWF, while Aldous’ half-brother, Andrew, would become a Nobel Prize winning physiologist. Huxley could also boast of being the nephew of Matthew Arnold as well as the friend of many prominent writers of his age besides H. G. Wells, such as D.H. Lawrence, Eric Blair (a.k.a. George Orwell) whom he taught at Eton, and various members of the Bloomsbury Group. So, it would be safe to assume, that in the coming scientific dictatorship, someone of Huxley’s credentials could still enjoy all those works of high culture deemed dangerous for public consumption because they are old and beautiful, and the controllers “don’t want people to be attracted by old things. [They] want them to like the new ones” (*BNW* 173).

At the same time, Shakespeare, as in the case of the Savage’s obsession with the Bard, is associated with social maladjustment and psychosis in *Brave New World*, expressing more the would-be physician and clinical psychologist Huxley and less the student of English Literature at Oxford. Thus, as a result of his impossible infatuation with Lenina Crowne, we see the sexually frustrated but morally incensed Savage spouting reams of misogynistic verse, in *King Lear* fashion:

Down from the waist they are Centaurs, though women all above. But to the girdle do the gods inherit. Beneath is all the fiend’s. There’s hell, there’s darkness, there is the sulphurous pit, burning scalding, stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie, pain, pain! Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary, to sweeten my imagination. (*BNW* 154)

This is a version of the noble savage motif that appears to doubly reverse civilized hierarchies by connecting great art with regression, while lending weight to the controller’s philistine argument that “You’ve got to choose between happiness and what people used to call high art. We’ve sacrificed the high art” (*BNW* 173). Christopher Hitchens has argued that Huxley “often held and expressed diametrically opposite opinions” (xii), but the way high art is presented in *Brave New World* suggests that its sacrifice by society is a price worth paying for the benefits of the World State. Thus, just as “soma”⁷ is like “Christianity without tears” (*BNW* 185), so the feelies are like Shakespeare without the neurosis, so to speak. This is the neurologist’s view of cultural phenomena and, for all his satirical intentions, Huxley, the “amused, Pyrrhonic aesthete” (*BNW* 8) seems to subscribe to it.

State-sanctioned sexual promiscuity plays a vital role in *Brave New World* as a means of keeping the masses happy, while families are abolished together with the institution of marriage. In the World State, it is instilled in the collective consciousness, the hive mind, that “everyone belongs to everyone else,” so exclusive relationships are frowned upon as tending to weaken the communal ethos. Huxley’s mother died when he was fourteen and his brother Noel committed suicide a few years later, so the author could hypothetically have viewed the abolition of mothers and families in *Brave New World* as one way of reducing the risks associated with emotional attachment. As he confessed in a letter to Mrs Kethevan Roberts on 18 May 1931, his “besetting sin” was “the dread and avoidance of emotion” (*Letters* 390). Besides the encouraging of promiscuity in the novel, there is also a suggestion of homosexuality in the relationship between Bernard and Helmholtz that doesn’t appear to trouble the authorities too much. Huxley may not have found this state

⁷ In one of the many verbal ironies of the novel, the name of the perfect drug means “body” in Greek.

of affairs entirely un-conducive given that he was not the monogamous type himself and had an open marriage with his wife Maria Nys, with whom he also shared a female lover, Mary Hutchinson. But sex is not only free and divorced from procreation in *Brave New World*, it is also taught to children at a very early age, presumably to prepare them for the recreational role it would play in their adult lives. The question of what kind of adults these children would grow into, systematically initiated into sexual practices before puberty and divorced from normal family life—not even knowing their parents—is not even entertained by Huxley. One assumes that he believed anything could be done with the human raw material, given the right doses of genetic engineering, hypnopaedia, and soma. It is interesting to note that, in his last novel, *Island* (1962), Huxley explicitly presents a society based on free sex, drugs, and social conditioning as the ideal state.

It is also unlikely that the author was opposed on principle to the use of drugs in *Brave New World*. Soma is promoted as the universal panacea and people go on drug-induced reveries for days—so-called, “soma holidays”—waking up none the worse for wear. Huxley who had experimented with drugs most of his life, shocked many of his early audiences by proposing in *The Doors of Perception* (1954) that mescaline and LSD were “drugs of unique distinction” for those of “sound liver and an untroubled mind” (22, 25). In *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley raves about a newly developed variant of lysergic acid, called LSD-25, which he describes as a soma-like “perception-improver and vision-producer that is, physiologically speaking, almost costless” (*BNWR* 109). In “The Ultimate Revolution” he reiterates this argument, claiming that...

there is evidently a whole class of drugs affecting the central nervous system which can produce enormous changes in sedation, in euphoria, in energizing the whole mental process without doing any perceptible harm to the human body, and this presents to me the most extraordinary revolution. (32:12-32:39)

Given Huxley’s obvious excitement about such developments, the only problem with the scientific dictatorship’s pharmacological manipulation of the masses, it seems, would be the negative side-effects of the drugs employed. Once science has solved this problem, the sky’s the limit.

Huxley may also not have been averse to the genetic engineering by which the various castes in *Brave New World* are developed and conditioned. In a way which recalls modern science-fiction scenarios, children are not born in the future World State but “decanted,” as it’s called—as though they were cocktails; they are not raised in nurseries but “Hatcheries,” reminding us of battery chickens. The mental and physical development of those destined to fill the lower positions within the social and economic system is deliberately arrested by adding alcohol to the test tubes where their fetuses grow. These low-class subjects are also more mass produced in relation to the higher castes using the Bokanovsky cloning method in which fertilized ovum are artificially split up into as many as 96 identical copies before they are allowed to develop. Finally, the hypnopaedic education which the Gammas, Deltas, and Epsilons receive is of a considerably lower standard than that given to the Alphas and Betas that are destined to carry out intellectual labour in the World State. Notwithstanding the evolutionary legacy of Huxley’s naturalist grandfather, and the Victorians’ general preoccupation with eugenics, the author of *Brave New World* had his own theories about breeding. He supported the idea that IQ and therefore individual worth was hereditary, but also believed it important to encourage “the normal and supernormal members of the population to have large families,” while preventing the subnormal “from having any children at all” (Hitchens xii). In *Brave New World Revisited*, he also presents the Malthusian argument that advances in medicine and

the general standard of living may have backfired on humanity by allowing the sick members of society to survive and multiply, supposedly contributing to the grave danger of overpopulation (*BNWR* 19-20). Thus, it would be safe to assume that Huxley did not fundamentally disagree with the eugenicist practices of the controllers in *Brave New World* that keep a very tight rein on the development of the human species. People of his stock never need have felt at a disadvantage in any coming technocracy, while the lower orders would be held in check and, moreover, conditioned to love their servitude, which for Huxley was the ultimate goal of education.

Indeed, the only negative thing about the Brave New World for Huxley seems to be the innocuous art and perhaps the lack of freedom to isolate oneself from the herd, every now and again. Everything else is there: unlimited, non-marital, non-procreative sex; no troublesome family ties; a plentiful supply of drugs with no side-effects or social stigma; everyone happy all the time, etc. Also, if one had the appropriate social rank and the nose for it, like Bernard, one could even travel outside the boundaries of the World State to study the primitive cultures found there. As Margaret Atwood points out, even the punishments of this society are of the kind that an intellectual like Huxley would have found conducive: exile to Iceland “where man’s Final End can be discussed among like minded intellects, without pestering normal people—in a sort of university as it were” (ix). This is where the intellectual rebel Bernard is finally consigned, together with the like-minded Helmholtz. As the controller tells Bernard, it’s more of a reward than a punishment, really, because there he’ll “meet the most interesting set of men and women to be found anywhere in the world. [...] All the people who aren’t satisfied with orthodoxy, who’ve got independent ideas of their own. Every one, in a word, who’s any one” (*BNW* 178). It’s almost as if Huxley is imagining exile to a future Bloomsbury Group as punishment for dissenters. If nothing else, this is a great improvement on the punishments devised by the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In the debate that takes place in the penultimate chapter of the novel between the main enemy of the World State, John the Savage, and its chief apologist, Mustapha Mond, the dice are loaded. The Savage claims the right to every good and every evil that has been banished from the technocracy. As he says, “I don’t want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin” (*BNW* 187). But he is no match for the wily controller, who eventually acknowledges the Savage’s rights to a more natural existence only because he knows that one man’s oppositional example could not possibly impact on such a strictly regimented society as the World State. As Huxley himself admitted in the 1946 foreword to *Brave New World*, there is no real choice in the novel: the alternative offered “between an insane life in Utopia, or the life of a primitive in an Indian village” is “a life more human in some respects, but in others hardly less queer and abnormal” (*BNW* 7). Indeed, life on the Indian Reservation is so rife with disease, dirt, and old age, that all other factors notwithstanding, very few people would prefer it to the sparkling clean, healthy, and hedonistic existence of the Brave New Worldians.

The Savage, who is not allowed to accompany Bernard and Helmholtz to Iceland for class reasons, finally becomes the tragic scapegoat of the scientific dictatorship. He exiles himself to a deserted lighthouse on the outskirts of London and, hounded by buzzing helicopters and sightseeing tourists, makes his last stand against civilization, recalling that other famous evolutionary throwback, King Kong, who first appeared in movie theatres in 1933, a year after the novel was published. The thrill-seeking New Worldians brave the Savage’s menaces, taking snapshots and throwing peanuts at him, “as to an ape” (*BNW* 198). Eventually, in an attempt to pacify him, they bring him Lenina Crowne, recalling the blonde Ann that King Kong falls in love with in the movie. However, instead of being

calmed by Lenina's presence, the Savage, in a state of religious mania, beats her viciously with a whip, and finally hangs himself from remorse. Thus, the only alternative that the novel offers to an oppressive and totally denatured society is an irrational and primitive individual who, unable to meet the scientific utopia's demands, gradually slips into self-destructive paranoia and is left behind by the ruthless march of evolutionary progress.

While presenting itself as a warning of what the future holds in store for humanity, it can be argued that *Brave New World* actually constitutes a propaganda document for the technocracy to which Huxley, like H.G. Wells, belonged. It is one of many such speculative narratives produced in the early twentieth century designed to covertly promote the idea of the World State and act as a vehicle for the social Darwinist agenda of the scientific elite. Michael Hoffman has called this kind of science fiction "predictive programming" which works by propagating "the illusion of an infallibly accurate vision of how the world is going to look in the future" (205). "Traditionally," writes Hoffman, "science fiction has appeared to most people as an adolescent genre, the province of time-wasting fantasies" (205). However, these apparently innocuous predictions, once ingested on a cognitive level, become self-fulfilling prophecies, subtly conditioning readers to fatalistically accept the vision of the future presented to them. As Huxley wrote at the end of *Brave New World Revisited*,

Under a scientific dictator education will really work—with the result that most men and women will grow up to love their servitude and will never dream of revolution. There seems to be no good reason why a thoroughly scientific dictatorship should ever be overthrown. (*BNWR* 179)

Hitchens claimed that, in *Brave New World*, "one can often detect strong hints of a vicarious approval of what is ostensibly being satirized" (xii). However, if we compare the contents of the novel with Huxley's life and non-fiction, then this "strong hint of [...] approval" becomes unambiguous affirmation, and what is usually taken as a dystopian vision of the future reveals its true colours.

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