

communist manifesto social studies

The Communist Manifesto, a seminal work co-authored by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, remains a cornerstone of social studies education. This potent document offers a critical analysis of capitalist society and a vision for a classless future. Understanding the Communist Manifesto is crucial for grasping historical movements, political ideologies, and ongoing societal debates. In this comprehensive article, we will delve into the historical context of the Communist Manifesto, its core tenets, its impact on social studies curricula, and its enduring relevance in contemporary discussions about economics and social justice. We will explore the historical forces that shaped Marx and Engels' thinking, dissect their key arguments regarding class struggle, the role of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, and their predictions for the future of society. Furthermore, we will examine how the Communist Manifesto is taught in social studies classes and why it continues to provoke both admiration and controversy.

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The Historical Context of the Communist Manifesto

To truly appreciate the Communist Manifesto's significance, it is vital to understand the socio-economic conditions of the mid-19th century in Europe. This era was characterized by the rapid

industrialization, a burgeoning working class, and stark inequalities. The Industrial Revolution, while bringing about unprecedented technological advancements and economic growth, also created immense social upheaval. Factories, powered by new machinery, became the centers of production, drawing vast numbers of people from rural areas to urban centers in search of work. This migration led to overcrowded cities, poor living conditions, and the exploitation of labor.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the principal authors of the Communist Manifesto, were deeply immersed in the intellectual currents of their time. They witnessed firsthand the harsh realities faced by the proletariat, the industrial working class, who often toiled for long hours in dangerous conditions for meager wages. Philosophers, economists, and social reformers were actively debating the causes and potential solutions to these societal ills. The prevailing economic system, capitalism, with its emphasis on private ownership and profit accumulation, was increasingly scrutinized for its role in perpetuating poverty and social stratification.

The political landscape was also volatile. Revolutionary ideas were spreading, challenging the established monarchies and aristocratic orders. The legacy of the French Revolution, with its ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, continued to inspire movements for social and political change. Marx and Engels were influenced by Hegelian philosophy, particularly the concept of dialectics, which posits that history progresses through conflict and the resolution of opposing forces. They sought to apply a materialist interpretation to this historical progression, focusing on the economic forces that shape society.

The Manifesto itself was commissioned by the Communist League, a workers' organization, and was intended to be a declaration of their principles and aims. Published in 1848, a year of widespread revolutions across Europe, the Communist Manifesto resonated with many who felt disenfranchised and oppressed. Its call to action and its critique of the existing social order made it a powerful document in the hands of those seeking radical change. Understanding this historical backdrop is crucial for comprehending the foundational arguments presented in the Communist Manifesto and its immediate impact.

The Core Tenets of the Communist Manifesto

At its heart, the Communist Manifesto is a call for a radical transformation of society, moving away from class-based exploitation towards a more equitable system. The central argument revolves around the concept of historical materialism, which posits that economic structures and the modes of production are the primary drivers of historical change and societal organization. Marx and Engels argued that throughout history, societies have been defined by the struggle between different social classes, each with its own economic interests.

The document famously begins with the assertion that "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." This statement encapsulates the Manifesto's core analytical framework. It proposes that societal development is not a random process but a consequence of the inherent contradictions and conflicts arising from the unequal distribution of power and resources between dominant and subordinate classes. These struggles, the authors contend, have shaped the political, legal, and ideological structures of every society from ancient times to the industrial age.

Another foundational tenet is the critique of capitalism. Marx and Engels viewed capitalism as a system inherently based on the exploitation of the working class by the capitalist class, who own the means of production. They argued that capitalists extract surplus value from the labor of the workers, paying them less than the value they create, and thus accumulating wealth and power. This inherent exploitation, they believed, creates a fundamental antagonism within capitalist society that cannot be resolved without a complete overthrow of the system.

The Manifesto also outlines a vision for a future communist society. This envisioned society would be classless, stateless, and characterized by collective ownership of the means of production. In such a society, the exploitation of man by man would cease, and resources would be distributed according to need: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." This utopian ideal, while controversial, has been a powerful inspiration for socialist and communist movements worldwide.

Key Concepts and Arguments

The Communist Manifesto is rich with concepts that have profoundly influenced political thought and social analysis. Understanding these key ideas is essential for grasping the document's argumentative structure and its lasting impact on social studies. These concepts provide the analytical tools through which Marx and Engels dissect the dynamics of capitalist society.

The Role of Class Struggle

The concept of class struggle is arguably the most central and pervasive theme in the Communist Manifesto. Marx and Engels contend that throughout history, societies have been divided into antagonistic classes based on their relationship to the means of production. In primitive societies, the struggle might have been between freemen and slaves. In feudal societies, it was between serfs and lords. Under capitalism, this struggle is primarily between the bourgeoisie (the capitalist class) and the proletariat (the working class).

The authors argue that these class struggles are not merely incidents of social discord but are the fundamental engine of historical progress. The conflicts between classes, arising from their opposing economic interests, lead to social revolutions and the eventual emergence of new modes of production and social organizations. The Communist Manifesto posits that the inherent contradictions within capitalism will inevitably intensify the class struggle, paving the way for its eventual demise and the rise of a new social order.

This perspective offers a materialist explanation for historical events, emphasizing the role of economic factors and class relations over abstract ideas or individual actions. The relentless pursuit of profit by the bourgeoisie, according to Marx and Engels, necessitates the exploitation of the proletariat, creating an unbridgeable chasm between these two classes.

The Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat

The Communist Manifesto meticulously details the roles and characteristics of the two primary classes in capitalist society: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie, or the capitalist class, are defined as the owners of the means of production – factories, land, capital, and raw materials. They are the employers, the exploiters of labor.

The Manifesto describes the bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class in its own right, instrumental in the overthrow of feudalism and the establishment of capitalism. They revolutionized the means of production, expanded global markets, and created unprecedented productive forces. However, Marx and Engels argue that the bourgeoisie's success also sows the seeds of its own destruction. Their system of production constantly generates crises, overproduction, and an ever-growing, increasingly impoverished proletariat.

The proletariat, on the other hand, are the wage-laborers, the industrial working class. They possess no means of production and are forced to sell their labor-power to the bourgeoisie in order to survive. The Manifesto describes the proletariat as a class that has nothing to lose but its chains. Their collective labor is the source of the bourgeoisie's wealth, yet they receive only a fraction of the value they create.

As capitalism develops, the proletariat grows in size and solidarity. They are increasingly concentrated in factories and urban centers, fostering a sense of shared experience and common interests. This concentration, coupled with the dehumanizing conditions of factory work, leads to the development of class consciousness – an awareness of their shared oppression and their collective power to bring about change.

The Communist Revolution and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

The Communist Manifesto argues that the escalating class struggle under capitalism will inevitably culminate in a proletarian revolution. This revolution is not seen as a spontaneous uprising but as a necessary historical outcome of capitalism's internal contradictions and the growing solidarity of the working class. The Manifesto suggests that the proletariat, once it has developed class consciousness, will seize political power and establish a new form of state.

Central to this revolutionary vision is the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat." This term does not refer to a tyrannical rule in the modern sense, but rather to a transitional phase where the working class, as the overwhelming majority of the population, exercises political power to dismantle the capitalist state apparatus and suppress any attempts by the bourgeoisie to restore the old order. It is envisioned as a temporary measure to pave the way for a truly classless society.

During this transitional period, the Manifesto outlines a series of measures intended to centralize the means of production in the hands of the state, which would then represent the collective interests of the proletariat. These measures, presented in Chapter II of the Manifesto, include the abolition of private property in land, a heavy progressive or graduated income tax, the abolition of all rights of

inheritance, and the centralization of credit and communication in the hands of the state.

The ultimate goal of this revolutionary process and the dictatorship of the proletariat is the abolition of all class distinctions, the elimination of exploitation, and the creation of a communist society where the state, having outlived its purpose as an instrument of class oppression, would eventually "wither away." This vision of a stateless, classless society remains a defining characteristic of Marxist thought.

The Communist Manifesto in Social Studies Education

The Communist Manifesto holds a significant, albeit often controversial, place in social studies curricula across the globe. Its enduring influence on political thought, economic systems, and historical events makes it a crucial document for students to engage with. Social studies educators utilize the Manifesto to explore a wide range of topics, from the development of political ideologies to the analysis of economic systems and the dynamics of social change.

Introducing students to the Communist Manifesto provides them with a powerful analytical tool for understanding historical periods marked by industrialization, class conflict, and revolutionary movements. It allows for a critical examination of the rise of capitalism, the conditions of the working class during the 19th and 20th centuries, and the emergence of socialist and communist political movements that shaped much of modern history. The document serves as a primary source for understanding the motivations and ideologies behind these movements.

Furthermore, engaging with the Communist Manifesto fosters critical thinking skills. Students are encouraged to analyze arguments, identify underlying assumptions, and evaluate the validity of the claims made by Marx and Engels. This process helps them develop a nuanced understanding of complex social and economic theories, moving beyond simplistic or dogmatic interpretations. It also provides a platform for discussing concepts like power, inequality, ideology, and revolution.

The pedagogical approaches employed in teaching the Communist Manifesto vary widely, reflecting the diverse perspectives and goals of educators. The primary aim is often to equip students with the intellectual tools to understand one of the most influential documents in modern history, irrespective of their personal agreement with its conclusions. This objective is achieved through various methods designed to make the text accessible and its ideas relevant.

Curriculum Integration and Pedagogical Approaches

Integrating the Communist Manifesto into social studies curricula requires careful consideration of learning objectives and student readiness. Educators typically position the document within broader units on political ideologies, economic systems, or historical revolutions. Its study often follows or precedes discussions on the Industrial Revolution, the rise of capitalism, and the development of socialist and labor movements.

Common pedagogical approaches include:

- **Direct Textual Analysis:** This involves close reading of selected passages from the Manifesto, focusing on key terms, concepts, and arguments. Educators might guide students through the analysis of the "Communist Manifesto meaning" within its historical context.
- **Comparative Studies:** The Manifesto is often compared with other foundational texts, such as Adam Smith's "The Wealth of Nations" or John Locke's political philosophy, to highlight contrasting views on economics, society, and governance.
- **Historical Contextualization:** Understanding the conditions under which Marx and Engels wrote is crucial. This involves exploring the social, economic, and political landscape of mid-19th century Europe, including the plight of industrial workers and the intellectual climate.
- **Debates and Discussions:** Facilitating structured debates and class discussions allows students to engage critically with the Manifesto's ideas, exploring its strengths, weaknesses, and implications. This can include debates on the relevance of class struggle today.
- **Case Studies:** Connecting the Manifesto's theories to historical events, such as the Russian Revolution or other socialist movements, helps students see the practical application and consequences of its ideas.
- **Source Analysis:** Students can be tasked with analyzing how the Communist Manifesto has been interpreted and utilized by various political groups throughout history, understanding its impact beyond its original publication.

The goal is not to indoctrinate students into communist ideology but to foster an informed understanding of a significant historical and philosophical work. Educators strive to present a balanced view, acknowledging both the document's analytical power and the criticisms leveled against its proposed solutions.

Challenges and Controversies in Teaching the Manifesto

Teaching the Communist Manifesto is often fraught with challenges and controversies. The document's association with historical events like the Soviet Union and other authoritarian regimes has led to its perception as a dangerous or radical text in many societies. This perception can create resistance from parents, community members, and even some administrators, who may view its inclusion in the curriculum as promoting subversive ideas.

One significant challenge is the inherent complexity of the text. The dense philosophical and economic arguments, combined with specific historical references, can be difficult for students to grasp without substantial scaffolding. Educators must employ strategies to make the material accessible and engaging, ensuring that students understand the nuances of concepts like historical materialism, surplus value, and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Another controversy stems from the diverse interpretations and applications of the Manifesto throughout history. Its ideas have been invoked by a wide spectrum of political movements, some democratic and others totalitarian. Educators must navigate this complex legacy, teaching students

to distinguish between Marx and Engels' original text and the actions of regimes that claimed to be Marxist. This involves critical examination of how the "communist manifesto explained" by different historical actors.

Furthermore, the very act of teaching such a politically charged document can be perceived as biased. Educators must strive for neutrality, presenting the Manifesto as an object of study rather than an endorsement of its ideology. This requires presenting counterarguments and alternative perspectives on capitalism and social organization. The goal is to foster intellectual inquiry and critical engagement, not to promote a specific political agenda.

The emotional and ideological baggage attached to communism can also make objective discussion difficult. Students may come to the classroom with pre-existing opinions, either highly critical or unreservedly admiring, which can hinder open and nuanced debate. Educators need to create a safe space for intellectual exploration, where diverse viewpoints can be expressed and respectfully examined.

Enduring Relevance and Contemporary Applications

Despite being written in the mid-19th century, the Communist Manifesto continues to resonate in the 21st century, offering a framework for understanding contemporary social, economic, and political issues. The core concepts of class analysis, critique of capitalism, and the impact of economic systems on societal structures remain remarkably relevant to discussions about globalization, inequality, and political movements today. The "Communist Manifesto analysis" of capitalism's inherent contradictions still sparks debate.

The document's insights into globalization are particularly potent. Marx and Engels described how the bourgeoisie, in its relentless pursuit of new markets, would "nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere." This description eerily foreshadows the interconnected global economy of today, characterized by multinational corporations, international trade, and the rapid movement of capital and labor across borders. The Manifesto's analysis of how capitalism transcends national boundaries provides a lens through which to examine contemporary global economic policies and their effects.

Moreover, the persistent issue of economic inequality worldwide makes the Manifesto's critique of class exploitation highly pertinent. Debates about wealth distribution, the concentration of capital, and the challenges faced by the working class in many developed and developing nations echo the concerns raised by Marx and Engels. The growing disparity between the ultra-rich and the majority of the population in many countries invites a re-examination of the systemic factors contributing to such imbalances, as outlined in the Manifesto's critique of capitalist accumulation.

The Manifesto's emphasis on the power of collective action and the potential for social change also finds echoes in contemporary social movements. From labor unions fighting for workers' rights to global justice movements advocating for fairer economic practices, the spirit of organized resistance against perceived injustices is a recurring theme that the Manifesto powerfully articulates. The document's call for solidarity among the oppressed continues to inspire activism and calls for systemic reform.

The Communist Manifesto and Modern Social Movements

The enduring legacy of the Communist Manifesto is perhaps most evident in its continued influence on modern social movements. While few contemporary movements explicitly identify as strictly Marxist-Leninist or advocate for the exact revolutionary strategies outlined in the 1848 text, the core analytical tools and critiques offered by Marx and Engels remain highly influential.

Many movements focused on economic justice, labor rights, and anti-globalization draw upon the Manifesto's foundational critique of capitalism. These movements often highlight issues of worker exploitation, the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, and the impact of corporate influence on political systems. The concept of "class struggle," albeit interpreted in broader terms to include issues of identity and intersectionality, remains a central lens for analyzing social inequality.

For example, movements advocating for higher minimum wages, stronger union protections, and more equitable distribution of resources often echo the Manifesto's call for a society where the means of production serve the many, not just the few. The critique of alienation, where workers feel disconnected from the products of their labor and from their own humanity due to repetitive and unfulfilling work, continues to resonate with contemporary discussions about job satisfaction and the nature of work in a capitalist economy.

Furthermore, the Manifesto's exploration of how economic systems shape ideology and culture can be seen in contemporary analyses of media, consumerism, and social values. The idea that dominant economic structures influence the prevailing ideas and beliefs within a society is a concept that permeates many critical social theories and activist analyses today. The "purpose of the Communist Manifesto" is often understood by these movements as providing a critical language to dissect and challenge existing power structures.

Critiques and Counterarguments

While the Communist Manifesto remains a powerful analytical tool, it has also faced significant and persistent critiques. The historical track record of states that have attempted to implement Marxist-Leninist principles, characterized by authoritarianism, economic inefficiency, and human rights abuses, has led many to reject its core propositions outright. The practical application of the "Communist Manifesto summary" in various regimes has proven disastrous for many.

One major criticism centers on the Manifesto's deterministic view of history. Critics argue that it oversimplifies historical change, reducing it primarily to economic forces and class conflict, while underestimating the role of culture, ideology, religion, and individual agency. The idea that capitalism's demise is an inevitable historical progression is seen by many as overly mechanistic and lacking empirical support.

The concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" has been a particular point of contention. Critics argue that this transitional phase, intended to safeguard the revolution, invariably leads to tyranny and the suppression of individual liberties. History has shown that states established under the banner of this concept have often become oppressive, failing to "wither away" as predicted and instead consolidating power in the hands of an elite.

Furthermore, critics question the feasibility of a classless society and the abolition of private property. They argue that private ownership is a fundamental aspect of human nature and economic progress, providing incentives for innovation and productivity. The potential for inefficiency, lack of innovation, and the concentration of power in the hands of the state in a system without private property are frequently raised concerns.

The Manifesto's predictions about the inevitable impoverishment of the proletariat have also been challenged. While significant inequalities persist, many capitalist societies have seen improvements in the living standards of the working class over time, thanks to labor reforms, social welfare programs, and economic growth. This has led some to argue that capitalism is more adaptable and capable of reform than Marx and Engels allowed.

Conclusion: The Lasting Impact of the Communist Manifesto

The Communist Manifesto, a product of its tumultuous 19th-century origins, stands as a monumental work in the history of political and economic thought. Its influence on social studies education is undeniable, providing students with a critical lens through which to examine the dynamics of power, class, and economic systems. By dissecting the historical context, core tenets, and key concepts of the Communist Manifesto, educators equip students with the tools to understand the forces that have shaped modern history and continue to influence contemporary global challenges.

The document's enduring relevance lies in its sharp critique of capitalism and its insights into globalization, inequality, and the potential for social change. While its historical applications have been fraught with controversy, the fundamental questions it raises about fairness, justice, and the distribution of resources remain pertinent. Understanding the Communist Manifesto allows for a deeper comprehension of a vast array of political ideologies, social movements, and economic debates that have shaped and continue to shape our world.

Ultimately, the study of the Communist Manifesto in social studies aims not to promote a specific ideology, but to foster critical thinking, historical understanding, and an informed engagement with complex societal issues. Its ability to provoke discussion and analysis, even centuries after its publication, solidifies its position as a cornerstone text in the academic exploration of social and political systems.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central thesis of the Communist Manifesto regarding class struggle?

The central thesis of the Communist Manifesto is that history is fundamentally a history of class struggles. It argues that throughout history, societies have been characterized by the oppression of one class by another, and that this conflict is the driving force of social change.

According to the Manifesto, what are the primary characteristics of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat?

The Manifesto describes the bourgeoisie as the capitalist class, who own the means of production (factories, land, etc.) and employ wage laborers. The proletariat is the working class, who have no ownership of the means of production and must sell their labor power to survive.

What does the Communist Manifesto propose as the ultimate goal of the communist revolution?

The ultimate goal of the communist revolution, as envisioned in the Manifesto, is the abolition of private property in the means of production, the establishment of a classless society, and the eventual 'withering away' of the state. This aims to create a society where everyone contributes according to their ability and receives according to their needs.

How does the Manifesto explain the role of industrialization in the development of capitalism and class consciousness?

The Manifesto argues that industrialization, driven by the bourgeoisie, created vast productive forces but also concentrated workers into large factories, fostering a sense of shared grievance and the development of class consciousness among the proletariat. This process creates the conditions for a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

What are some of the key 'measures' proposed by the Communists in the Manifesto to be implemented after the proletarian revolution?

The Manifesto outlines several transitional measures, including the abolition of land ownership, a heavy progressive or graduated income tax, the abolition of all rights of inheritance, centralization of credit and transport in the hands of the state, and free education for all children in public schools.

How does the Communist Manifesto address the idea of 'abolishing the family' or 'abolishing nationality'?

The Manifesto clarifies that it advocates for the abolition of the bourgeois family based on capitalist exploitation and the nationalistic sentiments that divide the working class. It envisions a future where social bonds are based on cooperation and shared humanity, rather than national borders or bourgeois family structures.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the Communist Manifesto and social studies, with descriptions:

- 1.

The Communist Manifesto: A Graphic Novel

This adaptation translates the dense philosophical text of Marx and Engels into an accessible graphic novel format. It visually depicts the historical context and core arguments of the Manifesto, making it understandable for a wider audience. The illustrations help to convey concepts like class struggle, alienation, and the envisioned communist society in a dynamic way. It's a great starting point for students or anyone new to the ideas presented in the original work.

2.

Marxism and the Philosophy of Science: A Critical Introduction

This book delves into how the principles outlined in the Communist Manifesto influenced the development of scientific thought and methodology. It examines the Marxist critique of positivism and explores the concept of dialectical materialism as a framework for understanding the natural and social world. The author analyzes the relationship between historical materialism and scientific inquiry, demonstrating how a revolutionary ideology shaped intellectual discourse. It offers a deeper understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of Marxist social analysis.

3.

The Spectre of the Communist Manifesto: Globalization and the New Left

This work explores the enduring relevance of the Communist Manifesto in the context of contemporary global capitalism and the rise of new social movements. It traces how the Manifesto's ideas have been reinterpreted and applied by various iterations of the New Left in response to evolving economic and political landscapes. The book discusses themes of internationalism, critique of capital, and the ongoing struggle for social justice. It highlights how the Manifesto continues to inspire critical analysis of power structures in a globalized world.

4.

Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy: A Critical Reader

This anthology presents a curated selection of essays and excerpts that critically engage with the foundational concepts of capitalism, socialism, and democracy, often in dialogue with the Communist Manifesto. It showcases diverse perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of each system and the ongoing debates surrounding their implementation. The reader explores historical and contemporary analyses of economic inequality, political power, and social organization. It provides a comprehensive overview of the intellectual landscape shaped by Marxist critiques.

5.

Engels' Socialism: Utopian and Scientific

While not the Communist Manifesto itself, this work by Friedrich Engels is a crucial companion piece that further clarifies and popularizes the core tenets of scientific socialism. It distinguishes Marxist socialism from earlier utopian socialist movements by grounding it in historical materialism and the analysis of class struggle. Engels explains key concepts like the materialist conception of history and the inevitability of socialist revolution. This book offers a more systematic exposition of the ideas that

underpin the Manifesto.

6.

The Communist Manifesto: A Critical Edition

This academic edition provides the original text of the Communist Manifesto alongside extensive historical and critical commentary. It includes introductions that contextualize the document within its historical moment, analyzing its intellectual influences and its reception. Annotations clarify difficult passages and explain key terminology, while essays explore the Manifesto's legacy and its impact on subsequent political thought and movements. It is an essential resource for serious study of the text.

7.

The Modern Prince: What Machiavelli's The Prince Teaches Us About Power Today

This book, while not directly about the Communist Manifesto, offers insights into the nature of power and leadership that are relevant to understanding the strategies and critiques presented by Marx and Engels. It examines Machiavelli's pragmatic approach to governance and political maneuvering. By analyzing the mechanics of acquiring and maintaining power, the book provides a contrasting or complementary perspective to the class-based analysis of power found in the Manifesto. It encourages reflection on how political action is undertaken.

8.

The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: A Response to the Communist Manifesto

This influential work in the philosophy of science, by Thomas Kuhn, while not a direct response, offers a framework for understanding radical change that can be implicitly contrasted with the societal revolutions proposed by the Communist Manifesto. Kuhn argues that scientific progress occurs through paradigm shifts, which involve fundamental changes in understanding and practice. This perspective allows for a comparative analysis of how revolutions, both in science and society, are theorized and enacted. It prompts consideration of how knowledge and social structures transform.

9.

Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century

This book provides a detailed analysis of how capitalist production methods evolved throughout the 20th century, building upon the critiques of labor and exploitation found in the Communist Manifesto. It examines the impact of scientific management and deskilling on the working class, arguing that capitalism systematically degrades the nature of work. The author uses Marxist analytical tools to demonstrate the ongoing struggle between capital and labor. It offers a concrete, empirical illustration of the principles advocated in the Manifesto.

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