AUTHENTIC REBELLION, TERRORISTIC INSTITUTIONALIZATION
On the Žižekian subject of the political

Marc De Kesel

… the more ‘authentic the rebellion, the more ‘terroristic’ is this institutionalization.
Slavoj Žižek¹

A little rebellion now and then is a good thing.
Thomas Jefferson²

Not Without a State, Not Without a Party
The life of a society encompasses a lot more than only state power. It is first of all a ‘system’ that instils solidarity among people, manages an economy of production and trade, and shapes all forms of culture. If the state intervenes, it is basically in order to bring things under its own control, or, as is all too often the case, to manipulate these things under the pretext of protecting and enforcing the state as such in favor of those who are in power. The state can thus easily become the direct enemy of emancipatory and revolutionary politics. The history of the West’s political Left illustrates this abundantly. Remember Karl Marx’s thesis that the end of the fight against capitalism coincides with surpassing the state as such. In his view, society in the proper sense of the term – as a community of ‘socii’, as associates in ‘liberty, equality and brotherhood’ – is irreconcilable with state power. For the same reason, many contemporary revolutionary activists consider it their main task to destabilize the state – or, as activists inspired by Deleuze and Guattari call it – to never stop de-territorializing its all too ‘static’ position. The real life of a society is too ‘diverse’, too ‘differential’, too ‘rhizomatic’ to be subsumed by the unifying stability principles of a state.

Although Slavoj Žižek is far from unsympathetic with this kind of de-territorializing revolutionary politics, he does not agree with its anti-state intentions.³ In one of his more recent books, In Defense of Lost Causes, for instance, he agrees with Peter Hallward that the poetics of ‘resistance’, of de-territorialized nomadic mobility, of creating lignes de fuite, of never being where one is expected to dwell, is not enough; the time has come to start creating what one is tempted to call liberated territories, the well-

¹ Žižek 2008a, 419.
³ The defense of the state has always been one of Žižek’s topics. See for instance his contribution to a publication of the NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst): RWIN 1993: np.
defined and delineated social spaces in which the reign of the System is suspended: a religious or artistic community, a political organization, and other forms of ‘a place of one’s own’.  

The ‘territories’ or ‘well-defined social places’ Žižek is pleading for in this passage are the slums in the suburbs of so many capitalist metropoles. They possess the real potential for revolutionary resistance, and if that potential is to be turned into a reality, it is only because these ‘proletarians’ are not nomadic but stick to their territory. They constitute the ‘part of no part’ from where a revolutionary change is to be expected. This is what Hugo Chavez, the former revolutionary president of Venezuela, understood so well, as Žižek explains on the next page.

Hugo Chavez’s greatest achievement in the first years of his rule was precisely the politicization (inclusion into political life, social mobilization) of slum-dwellers; in other countries, they mostly persist in apolitical inertia. It was this political mobilization of the slum-dwellers which saved him from a US-sponsored coup: to the surprise of everyone, Chavez included, the slum-dwellers descended en masse to the affluent city center, tipping the balance of power to his advantage.  

And, Žižek continues, this move by Chavez went hand in hand, not with the de-territorialization of the state, but with the conquering of these territories by the state. More precisely, the slum-dwellers’ revolutionary potential was integrated into the state and subsequently turned into the base of a new state power.

The course on which Chavez embarked from 2006 is the exact opposite of the postmodern Left’s mantra regarding de-territorialization, rejection of statist politics, and so on: far from ‘resisting state power’, he grabbed power (first by an attempted coup, then democratically), ruthlessly using the state apparatuses and interventions to promote his goals.  

Žižek concludes his reflection by stressing the necessity for any set of radical politics to aim at conquering and defending state power, since ‘[t]oday, it is the big capitalists, from Bill Gates to the ecological polluters, who “resist” the state’.  

In sum, revolutionary politics cannot do without something like a state. This is far from being in contradiction with the imperative requiring of the ‘impossible’ that is at the base of every revolution. In Demand the Impossible, a 2008 interview book, Žižek writes, referring to the anti-state criticism of May 1968:

I think it’s too easy to say that state power is corrupted, so let’s withdraw into this role of ethical critic of power, etc. But here I’m almost a conservative Hegelian. How many things have to function in order for something to be done? Laws, manners, rules: these

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4 Žižek 2008a, 426.
5 Žižek 2008a, 427. See also Žižek 2013, 103-107.
6 Žižek 2008a, 427.
7 Žižek 2008a, 427.
are what make us feel truly free. I don’t think that people are aware of this fact. That was the hypocrisy of many leftists there [in the Paris of May ’68]: their target was the whole structure of the state apparatus of power. But we still need to count on all the state apparatus functioning. So my vision is not some utopian community *without* a state. We can call it the state or whatever, but more than ever what we actually need are certain organisms of social power and its distribution. […] What fascinates me, therefore, is the idea that we the left should now take over this ideology: ‘We are the true law and order. We are the true morality.’ I very much like this idea of the left taking this position.\(^8\)

**Revolution as the Basis of the State**

Like no one else, Žižek is aware of the revolutionary basis and origin of the modern state. The American, the French and the Russian Revolutions have functioned as illuminating examples for the majority of the newly created states during the nineteenth and twentieth century. But while being the result of revolutions, these states, precisely by becoming states, have all been inclined to deny their revolutionary nature. They fought and destroyed state power, but once they had themselves grabbed power, many of them established state forms that were equally – or even more – rigid and oppressive than the ones they had overthrown. Their revolutions had fought the cruelties of the ancient regime, but often did not wait long to surpass them in cruelty, or even turn into regimes of terror. Fighting the *Ancien Régime*’s inequality and lack of freedom, Robespierre suspected all those who might have secretly preserved individual privileges and, at least in the eyes of Robespierre, allowed themselves more freedom than others. Soon, the leader of the *Comité du salut publique* (Commity of Public Safety) used both his party and the new state power to ‘purify’ the new revolutionary society from such enemies of the revolution. The guillotine became the face of freedom; state government turned into terror.

The modern state is thus the result of revolution, i.e. of an act of ‘negating’ the existing power, to put it in Hegelian terms (one of Žižek’s main theoretical frameworks). The core problem of the new state is how to deal with that origin, since negation is inherently applicable to itself. What about negating the negation, i.e. revolutionizing the revolution itself? What would that mean? How can such a second negation be conceived? Must a revolution not simply stick to its revolutionary origins and strive for stabilization of the new regime? Is the latter not simply unavoidable and necessary to turn the ‘negative’ breaking of power into something positive, in a party taking power and creating a new state? How else could the negativity that the revolution is based upon create a positive foundation for the new society people fought for? In this case, the following question emerges: How can the party and the (new) state deal with the negativity that is their origin, core and essence? Can the celebration and cultivation of its revolutionary origin be something else than a façade behind which the new power oppresses its opposition?

This question has grave implications. If ‘terror’ is an unavoidable and necessary part of modern politics – of breaking old and creating new states – how are new states to deal with

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\(^8\) Žižek 2013, 75-76. Žižek’s italics.
this? Where does the boundary between liberating violence and repressive terror lie? This abysmal question forms one of the main threads in Žižek’s political thought. How can we do justice to the radical negativity upon which all kinds of modern political order are based? How can we do justice to negativity without negating it? Is there a right way to negate negativity? These questions underlie Žižek’s reflections on the past, present and future of revolutionary politics. It is here that Žižek aims to finds answers to the faults of global capitalism and the failure of today’s democracy to solve them.

Democracy’s Deficiency
Žižek is not afraid of phrasing the latter problem in the shape of the following suggestive question: What if today’s political power is held by capitalism, and liberal democracy merely functions as its façade? Even though Žižek is not against democratic practices per se, he takes that question very seriously.

As is commonly known, Žižek endorses the Marxist thesis that globalized capital holds the real political power, and not national or international political bodies. How then are we to stop the inequality and injustice that inevitably result from a global capitalist world order? Žižek’s answer is a classical Marxist one: only a radical negation of capitalism can change the existing unjust order of the world. He thus pleads for a revolution, in the strongest possible sense of the term: a radical denial, an act of negation without compromises, overthrowing the totality of the existing capitalist system.

One of Žižek’s most controversial moves has been his counterposing of revolution and democracy. Why can democracy not be the agency of an anti-capitalist revolution? For is democracy itself not a game of negativity par excellence? In a democratic system, no one really possesses the power, since the one who has it has received it from others, more precisely from the ‘general will’, which is the only authority that really possesses the power. However, ‘the people’ can only speak when their supposed unity is ‘denied’ and split into the voices of every citizen separately. Only on Election Day do the people speak. Yet, every citizen’s vote only expresses his or her own individual will, irrespective of what his or her fellow citizens vote. And the day after the elections, the people’s ‘general will’ is immediately alienated by the voice of their representatives. Moreover, the whole procedure of democracy is organized in such a way that the voice – including the power – of the representatives is able to be contested and negated by parliamentary and other opposition: by trade unions, by the press and the media, and so on. In short, although democracy stands for the will of the people as the basis of all political power, that will performs in a principally negative way: negated by its representatives, negated by limited time of that representation, negated by the multitude of individuals unable to speak with ‘one and indivisible’ voice, et cetera.⁹

So why is it that this game of negativity that is democracy is not able to say ‘no’ to what, certainly on a global scale, causes disaster for the majority of the people: capitalism? Because democracy is not able to operationalize its own terror; thus one can summarize Žižek’s provocative answer. Hence, ‘the ultimate democratic illusion – and, simultaneously,

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the point at which the limitations of democracy become directly tangible – is that one can accomplish social revolution painlessly, through “peaceful means”, by simply winning elections.\(^{10}\)

Žižek proposes a different definition of ‘real’ democracy, thus denouncing the ‘procedural’ form of democracy that is described above. For Žižek, the core of this ‘true’ democracy is harsh negativity. It is not the regime of the majority, but of those denied by that majority, of those who are not allowed to rise to platforms of political power. Society turns into democracy when the excluded are seen as its real representatives, those who are part of society but have no part in it. A society becomes democratic when it ‘politicizes’ those who up to that point were excluded from it, those who were considered to be insignificant outsiders of the political.

This identification of the part of society with no properly defined place within it (or which rejects the allocated subordinated place within it) with the Whole is the elementary gesture of politicization, discernable in all great democratic events from the French Revolution (in which *le troisième état* proclaimed itself identical to the Nation as such, against the aristocracy and clergy) to the demise of East European socialism (in which dissident ‘fora’ proclaimed themselves representative of the entire society against the party *nomenklatura*). In this precise sense, politics and democracy are synonymous: the basic aim of anti-democratic politics always and by definition is and was depoliticization, the demand that ‘things should turn to normal’, with each individual sticking to his or her particular job.\(^{11}\)

Žižek’s point is that the historical forms of liberal democracy as they were put into practice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are in fact anti-democratic. These forms of democracy deny or neutralize the ‘event’ of the real ‘*demos*’, the people as ‘*plebs*’, negating that society. Liberal democracy depoliticizes the (democratic and radically negative) core of politics, the very essence of democracy. That essence is revolutionary, since it puts the excluded in the center of the society that excludes them. This radical kind of change is not possible within the boundaries of reformist liberal democratic procedures; it requires an ‘explosion’ of the existing society, a drastic rebellion which overthrows the social order, democratic procedures included. And, so Žižek concludes in the sentence following the ones just quoted:

And this brings us to the inevitable paradoxical conclusion: *the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ is another name for the violence of the democratic explosion itself.* The ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ is thus the zero-level at which the difference between legitimate and illegitimate state power is suspended, in other words, when state power as such is illegitimate.\(^{12}\)

\(^{10}\) Žižek 2008b, lxxx.
\(^{11}\) Žižek 2008a, 415-416.
\(^{12}\) Žižek 2008a, 416. Zizek’s italics.
What seems to be the opposite of democracy is in fact its core: dictatorship\(^\text{13}\), not dictatorship as such but dictatorship by those who, up to that moment, experienced the social order as a dictatorship: the excluded, the ‘proletarians’. However, democracy is not able to keep itself at the level of its own core. A few lines further, we read:

This strange coupling of democracy and dictatorship is grounded in the tension that pertains to the very notion of democracy. There are two elementary and irreducible sides to democracy: violent egalitarian imposition of those who are ‘supernumerary’; and the regulated (more or less) universal procedure of choosing those who exert power. How do these two sides relate to each other? What if democracy in the second sense (the regulated procedure of registering the ‘people’s voice’) is ultimately a defense against itself, against democracy in the sense of the violent intrusion of the egalitarian logic that disturbs the hierarchical functioning of the social system, an attempt to re-functionallize this excess, to make it a part of the normal running things.\(^\text{14}\)

Democracy cannot but repress its very core, its explosive negativity. In its own eyes, this explosive negativity appears as mere terror. ‘The “terroristic” aspect of democracy can only appear as its “totalitarian” distortion’, we read a few lines further. Our democratic eyes are not able to see ‘the line that separates the authentic democratic explosion of revolutionary terror from the “totalitarian” party state regime’.\(^\text{15}\) Still, Žižek’s political project is not simply about rehabilitating the democratic explosion. The question is how this democratic explosion can be ‘inscribed’ in a new social order. Referring to Jacques Rancière in deeming the social order as a ‘police’ order, Žižek states\(^\text{16}\):

The true task lies not in momentary democratic explosions which undermine the established ‘police’ order, but in the dimension designated by Badiou as that of ‘fidelity’ to the Event: translating/inscribing the democratic explosion into the positive ‘police’ order, imposing on social reality a new lasting order. This is the properly ‘terroristic’ dimension of every authentic democratic explosion: the brutal imposition of a new order. And this is why, while everybody loves democratic rebellions, the spectacular/carnivalesque explosions of the popular will, anxiety arises when this will wants to persist, to institutionalize itself – and the more “authentic” the rebellion, the more ‘terroristic’ is this institutionalization.\(^\text{17}\)

Thus, Žižek claims that what is needed to combat capitalism is not procedural democracy but ‘real’ democracy. However, since the latter cannot but repress and betray its ‘real’ core, we do not need such things as democracy at all. Democracy is even our ‘enemy’, Žižek writes.\(^\text{18}\) We

\(^{13}\)&nbsp;See also Žižek 2010, 393: ‘Pure democracy has to appear as its opposite’. Zizek’s italics.

\(^{14}\)&nbsp;Žižek 2008a, 417. Zizek’s italics.

\(^{15}\)&nbsp;Žižek 2008a, 418.

\(^{16}\)&nbsp;See, for instance chapter 2 in Rancière 1999, 21-42.

\(^{17}\)&nbsp;Žižek 2008a, 418-419. Zizek’s italics.

\(^{18}\)&nbsp;In the ‘Introduction’ to a collection of Mao texts, Žižek includes a quote by Alain Badiou: ‘Today the enemy is not called the Empire of Capital. It is called Democracy’. And, as Žižek explains: ‘What today, prevents the
need revolution, ‘rebellion’, “authentic” rebellion’. Seen from our everyday liberal democratic perspective, we need ‘terror’, since the institutionalization of that rebellion – the ‘negation of negation’ that does not repress its original negativity – cannot but have a ‘terroristic’ appearance.

For Žižek, irrespective of its appearance, ‘terror’ is needed in order to make a rebellion ‘authentic’. In this sense, Žižek pleads for ‘good terror’, although it remains unclear what he means by this and how it is different from terror sec.¹⁹ Perhaps, our attachment to the liberal democratic order does not allow us to see the difference?

In sum, negativity, the negation of the present social order, forms the ‘essence’ of a just politics. This negativity may not be negated by the new order. And, yet, it cannot but be. The only way to deal with this conundrum is, according to Žižek, to ‘translate’ and ‘inscribe’ this negativity as such (as ‘terror’) into the new order. In the same move, the new order must establish new rules, take power and establish a state. For Žižek, the only actor capable of doing so in a conscious and reflective way – conscious and reflective of the problems discerned above – is the political party.

The Party/State as Subject of the Political
Žižek is never negative about the state as such. It is true that a revolution must overthrow the state, but an ‘authentic’ rebellion has to create a new state in the same move. To do so in a right way, to avoid the trap of the new regime evolving into a similarly repressive state, a platform is needed that remains conscious of the negative core and origin of the new regime. This is the only way in which mere negativity can be turned into ‘good’ negativity, the right way to negate negativity. The state or party is capable of assuming such a role. Without the stable platform of a party or a state, the negativity at the origin of the new revolutionary society would give way to repressive terror. That party or state, however, will never be itself without some brutal negativity, some ‘terror’.

Žižek thus stresses the necessity of a party or a state, emphasizes the inescapably terroristic side of its rule and suggests that there is the possibility of ‘good terror’. All this, however, conceals the theoretical problem at the heart of this issue. Who or what is the ‘subject’ of society and politics, i.e. its ‘bearer’, its ‘base’ or ‘foundation’?²⁰ For Žižek, revolutionary politics must acknowledge that the real subject of politics is negativity, the negation of the present social order. The only way of doing so is by radically embracing that negativity. Thus, revolutionaries must take the plunge into it, must surrender themselves to

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¹⁹ Žižek 2013, 385.
²⁰ ‘Subject’ is used here in the ‘formal’ sense of the term. Its origin is the Latin ‘subiectum’, in Aristotle’s logic indicating the ‘bearer’ of an ‘attribute’. For instance: a tree (subiectum) is green (attribute). In Late Antiquity, the word gains an ontological meaning. Subiectum becomes the ‘bearer’ of being as such. In medieval Christian philosophy, God is the subject. That divine subject ‘dies’ with the emerging of Modernity in the 17th century, when Man becomes his own bearer/subject. If the same goes for society or the state (society has ‘itself’ as subject/bearer), what, then, is that ‘self’? This question about the core or essence of modern society continues to haunt modern political philosophy. Žižek follows Hegel and states that at the center of society there is ‘nothing’, that its ‘self’ is pure ‘negativity’. Because of this, the core or essence of society is inherently revolutionary. For an introduction to the genealogy of the word ‘subject’, see for instance: Balibar, Cassin and Libera 2004.
that negativity without any reserve. As an example, Žižek refers to Lenin’s decision to incite the Russian Revolution. This decision was not based upon the correct application of the Marxist theory, but rather upon the radical opposite. Marxism did not give Lenin the conviction that his Revolution would succeed. Rather, it was an all-or-nothing decision, an act that might work out in two ways, without guarantees. For Žižek, precisely the negative character of such an act requires an agency capable of turning that negativity into positivity.

In order to think in terms of that agency, Žižek refers to the philosophical theory of Alain Badiou. For Badiou, society is based on a radical contingency: the hidden possibility of any society reconnecting with its ontological ‘ground’. This reconnection allows it to negate and revolutionize the existing order. Badiou’s term for this is the ‘event’. Under the French Ancien régime, it was unheard of and unthinkable that all human beings were politically equal. Under that regime, men were divided into three ‘estates’, and the sum of these estates was supposed to be the state. For Badiou, those who were not represented in the state – the ‘part of no part’ as Žižek calls them – were the beholders of the ‘event’. Not being represented, they were simply there: nameless, radical, contingent. The realization that Man ‘is’ and has a right to be heard, regardless of his belonging to any official representation, constituted an ‘event’ that reconnected society with its ‘event-based’ foundation. This realization formed the basis of radical political action capable of radically reconstituting the basis of society. At the same time, there was ‘truth’ in that event: all men are equal simply because they exist; their political equality is based in the universality of their very being.

Although the possibility of an ‘event’ is always present in society, it can only happen when some recognize it, and on that basis start challenging the existing order. To be realized, the event needs a revolution and, thus, revolutionaries who perform that revolution – by forming a party and taking power to take over and transform the state. For Badiou, the event needs a ‘subject’, the revolution needs revolutionaries as ‘bearers’ of the event. Those who decide to be loyal to the truth acknowledged in the event – the idea that all human beings are politically equal – are its subject. The subject is the party fighting to turn the truth of the event into reality. For Badiou, the real basis of a society is the event, but the event itself is not the subject. In his theory, the word ‘subject’ is strictly preserved for the revolutionary agency, for those who turn the possibility of the event into reality.

It is important to note that Badiou’s subject is not ‘contaminated’ – or: transformed – by the event (of, for example, the French Revolution). The event poses a radical negativity, haunting society as long as it is not realized. Its subject on the other hand, the revolutionary party, appears as mere positivity. At every moment, the party remains the self-assured party it considers itself to be, also when it starts ruling society in the shape of a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. Even when the force that it uses turns out to be terroristic, it has to remain loyal to the truth-event, despite that terror.

With Žižek inspired by Hegel’s philosophy, however, one would expect him to claim, against Badiou, that the event does contaminate its subject. Those who sustain and realize a revolution have to fight, not only against their opponents, but also against the negativity that is part of their very position as the bearer of the said revolution. In the end, the terror of Robespierre’s government changed the revolutionary regime itself, including the

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21 Badiou 2006; Žižek 2014.
revolutionaries who started the French Revolution. As a result, the new regime became its own negation. This example shows why the revolutionary subject – the party, for instance – can never hold any certainty about itself. At any time, it may discover it does not possess the truth it supposed it possessed.

Yet, Žižek does not pay much attention to the possibility of the subject being contaminated by the negativity of the event. This is remarkable, given that other main framework in which his thought operates: Lacanian theory. Lacan was a psychoanalyst and philosopher, who focused his work on theorizing the subject, both as personal identity and as political or social identities. In Lacanian theory, identity is marked by desire: one is never identical with oneself, rather one coincides with a desire to be so. However, that desire can never be fulfilled. That lack marks our existence, for the (individual, political or social) subject is a ‘split subject’. To put it in typically Lacanian phrasing: the subject ‘is’ a ‘lack of being’. This traumatic split defines the human condition. For Lacan, our condition is marked by a radical negativity, a negativity that contaminates us even on the level of the individual subject.

Žižek is familiar with and supportive of Lacan’s theories. With Lacan, he stresses that, to overcome his ‘split’ state, the subject must confront itself and must face the traumatic negativity which is at its heart. Furthermore, he agrees with Lacan that this can only be done successfully in a way that is self-destructive for that very subject. That confrontation, the ‘Act’ in Lacanian terms, has become a central concept in Žižek’s theory. In ‘committing’ an Act, the subject casts off the alienated identity it bears, and fully embraces the ‘lack of being’ upon which that identity rests. Thus, in deciding to try and seize power, Lenin jumped into the ‘lack’, embracing the groundlessness and uncertainty that were at the heart of his Act. In doing so, Žižek often repeats, he stopped being a ‘Marxist’ and instead became a ‘Leninist’. The Act is by definition revolutionary. If successful, it incites a revolution that destroys the coordinates of the existing order and creates new coordinates for a new order. For Žižek, the Badiouian ‘event’ requires such an Act that destroys the subject and transforms it, so as to avoid the revolution giving way to bad terror. Robespierre remained committed to his original program and thus changed from a liberator into a tyrant. He was not able to build on the negativity that was at the heart of his revolutionary act.

For Žižek, the subject that decides to commit an Act has to give up its very position as a subject, whereas for Badiou the event requires a subject that firmly holds its position. Compared to Badiou’s ideas about the relationship between the event and its subject, the Žižekian view on the relationship between the Act and its subject is thoroughly paradoxical. However negative and ‘subjectless’ a revolutionary Act may be, it still requires a subject, someone who commits to the revolutionary Act. In Žižek’s writings on democracy, it is the excluded who Act, taking power of those who previously excluded them and, in taking power, constituting a power that is ‘one and indivisible’. In countless reflections on the revolutionary Act, Žižek ends up claiming the necessity of a fully positive subject. Each time, however, when the question re-emerges of how this subject will subsequently have to deal with the negative core of the new society, Žižek refers to the transformative nature of the Act with regard to the subject. Is this one of the reasons why Žižek feels so close to the Badiouian system?
At this point, Žižek’s thinking keeps revolving around questions. Who is to Act? Where does the boundary between liberating violence and revolutionary terror lie? Even if one agrees with the idea that, within the process of a revolution, a phase of dictatorship is unavoidable, one does not really find in Žižek’s thinking indications of how that dictatorship will turn into a state that recognizes its inner negativity, its split condition (in the Lacanian sense of the term). Will this conclusion be countered by new reflections that will emerge within the flow of publications that will surely continue to appear?
References


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