

Power and Knowledge: Toward a New Critical Synthesis

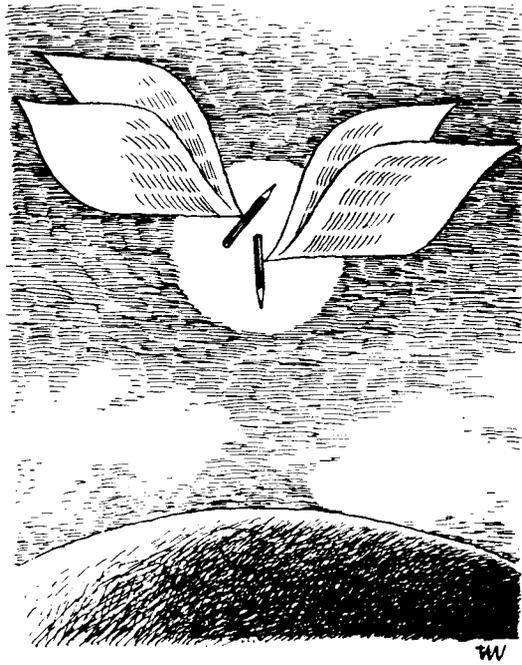
by Sue Curry Jansen

A review of the critical theories of Habermas, Marcuse, and Agger concludes that, though the time is right for a rapprochement of the two branches of neo-Marxian communication studies, such an integration cannot take place until an adequate theory of mass media is developed.

Pascal's assertion that "there is a time to call Paris Paris and a time to call it the capitol of the Kingdom" implicitly recognizes the knot that binds power and knowledge. But the legacy of occidental rationalism encourages us to deny or ignore its epistemological implications. Thus, for example, formalism directs us to regard synonymous expressions as equivalences: interchangeable "markers" that can be represented by a common symbol in the manipulations of machine languages. Only the discipline of rhetoric systematically applies the Pascalian insight. However, following the precedent set by Aristotle, philosophers have generally dismissed rhetoric as a secondary art, at best a form of salesmanship, so that even the work of a great rhetorician like Kenneth Burke has remained in the margins of contemporary thought about thought.

Today, however, the ranks of those who recognize that Paris is not just Paris are swelling. Crisis within the philosophy of science as well as growing political cynicism among citizens-at-large has led to widespread questioning of established modes of legitimating both knowledge and power. Within communication studies, this questioning, or ferment, has generated an interest in the "critical" social theory initially articulated by Max Horkheimer, Friedrich Pollock, Theodor Adorno, and their associates at the Institut für Sozialforschung (the Frankfurt School) in the 1930s, and subsequently enriched by Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen

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Habermas in their respective attempts to secure a basis for emancipatory communication in industrial societies.

For the two waves of critical theory explicitly recognized the dialectic bond uniting power and knowledge. They affirmed the familiar dictum that “power is knowledge and knowledge, power.” However, they did so with a radical epistemology that does not merely acknowledge that power uses and corrupts knowledge, but also recognizes that it sets the conditions for knowledge—provides its auspices and establishes the rules of permission and proscription that endow it with coherence. The resulting theory of knowledge is realistic but also deeply pessimistic. With Nietzsche, apologists of the first wave of critical theory recognized the impossibility of “immaculate perception.” They acknowledged that “we all harbor hidden gardens and plantings.” But, with Marx, they also recognized that capital usually determines how those gardens will be sown.

The German Ideology of 1846 was, of course, the immediate textual precedent for critical theory’s perspective on repressed or distorted communication. In the relevant passages, Marx and Engels (20) contend that the abstract (formal) language of philosophers that creates the impression that thought is free of practical interests is only “the distorted language of the actual world”: a language that reflects and secures the prevailing form of the division of labor (p. 119). They point out that, under capitalism, even the categories that lie behind our semantic

conventions are skewed by property relations, so that "in language [as in life] the relations of buying and selling have been the basis of all others" (p. 102).

Taking up their charge nearly a century after the fathers of world revolution had completed their mischief, "critical" theorists chose their prefix and defined their theoretical enterprise deliberately, reflexively.

"Critical" theorists sought to distance their perspective from vulgar (mechanical) Marxism and to establish kinship with the Hegelian and philological roots of Marx's conceptions of alienation, consciousness, and ideology. They were students of Dilthey, von Humboldt, Schiller, Heine, Grimm, Nietzsche, Weber, and Freud, as well as Marx. But they were also contemporaries of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin.

Contra positivism, including the positivistic strains in Marxism, they regarded the Enlightenment as a betrayal of reason rather than an extension of it, a betrayal that established the hegemony of instrumental reason and thereby prepared the way for the emergence of monopoly capitalism (12, 13). Similarly, they did not view fascism as a singular historical aberration. Rather, they saw it as a logical extension of the structures of crisis-ridden advanced capitalism. Consequently, they tried to outline a perspective on capitalist social institutions that was both "scientific" (amenable to documentary validation) and at the same time "critical" (committed to the creation of a more rational social order) (11, 14, 25, 26).

Their theory of personality and culture was also radically revisionist. Consistent with the German philological tradition and the then emergent Freudian perspective, they maintained that we are captives of culture bound in "the hermeneutic circle" of language. They were far less optimistic than Marx regarding prospects for breaking out of that captivity, believing that, in the twentieth century, mass media and mass entertainments (what Adorno would later call "the culture industry") had so thoroughly colonized the consciousness of the industrialized masses that they were no longer able to even conceive of resistance, let alone articulate a platform for emancipatory social change. Indeed, Horkheimer and Adorno (13) contended that the culture industry had actually invaded the collective unconscious, so that even the hopes, dreams, and utopian fantasies of the masses had come to bear the imprimatur of Hollywood, world headquarters of the culture industry. As students of Freud and residents of Nazi Germany (until their self-imposed exile after 1933), Horkheimer and Adorno were keenly aware of the role mythic thought and story telling play in human motivation, even in a scientific age. They believed that apologists of capital not only control the institutions of popular culture through ownership, but also exercise dominion over the popular imagination.

Horkheimer and Adorno could see no way out. Hence, the first wave of critical theory was praxeologically sterile. Its emancipatory project was stillborn. It offered no practical plan of resistance, no program for translating criticism into action. In spite of its emancipatory commitments, it engendered pessimism and resignation. And, in spite of its egalitarian goals, the first wave of critical theory has been charged with elitism (2, 8). The assumption pervades the texts of Horkheimer and Adorno that only critical theorists and other trained dialecticians possess the conceptual resources necessary to see through the trickery of the culture industry. Whether this apparently elitist conclusion is evidence of an endemic arrogance (and implicit vanguardism) within the perspective or whether it is a testament to the power and cogency of critical theory in illuminating the hidden mechanics of the culture industry is for the reader to decide.

Failure to effectively resolve these issues combined with a hostile political climate (“the Cold War”) to lead many postwar Anglo-American social scientists to dismiss much of the work of those associated with the first wave of critical theory as irrationalist and nihilist. Some associates of the original Frankfurt School (e.g., Erich Fromm, Franz Neumann, Karl Mannheim, Paul Lazarsfeld) established reputations in philosophy, history, sociology, and communications independent of their earlier affiliations with the Frankfurt Institute. Others, like Horkheimer, Adorno, Leo Lowenthal, and Herbert Marcuse, worked throughout their lives to resolve the impasse of the first wave of critical theory. In recent decades, a second generation of critical theorists, led by Jürgen Habermas, has also taken up the challenge. Marcuse’s analysis of linguistic domination and its dialectical counterpart, his proposal for “linguistic therapy,” as well as Habermas’s theory of “communicative competence” and his attempt to specify the conditions of an “ideal speech situation,” are of special interest to students of political linguistics. For both of these thinkers try to chart escape routes out of a language and culture dominated by instrumental reason.

In this essay I will describe the topography of the proposed escape routes, note their limitations, and review some recent advances in critical theory that suggest new possibilities for countering the antidemocratic effects of linguistic domination.

Marcuse put forth his ideas on linguistic domination in 1955 within the context of his long-standing debate with “revisionary neo-Freudians,” especially Jungians (16). Consequently, these ideas remain relatively unfamiliar to many communication theorists. However, one need not share Marcuse’s Freudian sympathies to find his perspective on language and communication compelling. In essence, Marcuse tried to preserve the liberating message in Freud’s theory of repression. He saw

it as the essential subtext of the Freudian breakthrough. Thus, he maintained that, at its inception, "psychoanalysis was a radically critical theory" because it provided a method for demystifying repression and nurturing desires for real autonomy (p. 217). However, he contended that neo-Freudians had transformed psychoanalysis into an ideology that justifies repression as the price that must be paid for civilization.¹

Contra this "ideological" reading of Freud that reifies repression, Marcuse offered a "sociological" reading. That is, he insisted on viewing every collective form of repression in relative and historical terms. Thus, he maintained that, in our time, domination is based upon (a) "surplus repression," which supports a complex hierarchical division of labor, and (b) "the performance principle," which subordinates all life-affirming energies to the demands of work. He contended that this system of domination has made a sham of participatory democracy, and that even science—once the cutting edge for human freedom—is now implicated in legitimating and maintaining the sham. Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (17), published in 1964, was intended as an extension of this sociological analysis. He conceived it as an empirical case study of the increasingly invisible structures of social control in advanced capitalist societies: control effected by subordinating all human needs to the imperatives of instrumental reason. Marcuse's description of the dehumanization of American language and culture in *One-Dimensional Man* rivals the most desolate passages in the writings of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Walter Benjamin.

But the work of the dialectician does not end with critique. Unlike many of his followers in the New Left who were content to sloganize and vulgarize Marcuse—cry "cooptation" and retreat to a comfortable narcissism—Marcuse himself combined critical rigor with an unwavering commitment to a "new sensibility" that could transcend instrumental domination. He continued to pursue all paths that might lead those who had been socialized into silence and subservience to discover new vocabularies that could prepare the way for "a return of the repressed." Marcuse's somber testaments, like Freud's, contain promises of transcendence, promises that could be realized through "linguistic therapy."

To describe the way those in power are able systematically to skew semantic conventions, linguistic rules, and epistemological criteria, to deny dissent and preserve their own interests in the maintenance of the status quo, Marcuse used the term "political linguistics."

He characterizes political linguistics as the "armor of the Establishment" and points out that "one of the most effective rights of the Sovereign is the right to establish enforceable definitions of words" (18,

¹ Thus, Marcuse's position is not inconsistent with recent critiques of the medical model of madness, *re*: Rosanhan, Szasz, Laing, and Scheff.

p. 730). So, for example, “in the established vocabulary, ‘violence’ is a term which one does not apply to the action of the police, the National Guard, the Marshals, the Marines, the bombers” (p. 72). Similarly, “terrorism” is never used to describe the actions of friendly governments, no matter how abhorrent. And, in contemporary pseudo-liberal societies, “censorship” has become a pejorative code word reserved for those who posit constructions of reality different from the established one.²

Advocates of rhetorical analysis, like Kenneth Burke (5) and Murray Edelman (7), have provided invaluable tools for decoding political linguistics. However, Marcuse’s approach to linguistic therapy is far more radical. He contends that development of a new sensibility and a new consciousness requires a new language to create and communicate new values: “the rupture with the continuum of domination must also be a rupture with the vocabulary of domination” (18, p. 33). Linguistic therapy, then, is an attempt to liberate words (and thereby concepts) from distortion of their meanings by established systems of domination. Marcuse acknowledged that this may be a utopian quest. He admitted that the process of linguistic domination has been with us throughout history and that no revolution has transcended it: no revolution has severed the hierarchical scaffolding of language and power. Yet, he expressed the hope that, when humankind is released from the most demeaning forms of labor by advanced technology, a new, humanistic reality principle will displace the imperatives of “surplus repression” and “the performance principle.”

Marcuse regarded linguistic therapy as prologue to, and architect of, an enlarged concept of rationality in which “the aesthetic dimension” of human sensibility is no longer repressed (19). He maintained that, so far, black Americans have been the most effective agents of linguistic therapy. He cites their refusal and aesthetic reversal of the language of oppression as expressed in words and phrases like “soul,” “black power,” and “black is beautiful.”³ The mandate of linguistic therapy, then, is to restore the dialogic powers of the people by rescuing language from the control of the dominators. Marcuse did not assume that words were free of history in the precapitalist era. But he did contend that it is possible to strip away the veneer of surplus distortion acquired by language under the rule of instrumental reason. So, for example, it would be possible to restore or recover the critical edge that words like “freedom,” “equality,” and “justice” had during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when they were essential terms in the language of the repressed rather than in the vocabulary of ideological control.

² Smythe (27, p. 235) underscores this point in his critique of the ideology of arguments for the free flow of information.

³ Grier and Cobbs (9) explore in some detail the double meanings of black language and the way in which they function both as liberating and repressive elements in communication.

Nevertheless, there are problems with Marcuse's formulation. In spite of his acute awareness of the corporate establishment's power to absorb and domesticate criticism, Marcuse fails to come to terms effectively with the pervasive role mass media, especially television, play in colonizing consciousness and extending linguistic domination. As Dallas Smythe demonstrated in *Dependency Road* (27), more time away from the factory or office does not necessarily mean greater freedom from instrumental relations, for, under advanced capitalism, productive labor includes consumption. Mass media keep people "working," marketing consumer products to themselves, even during their so-called leisure time. So most Americans spend their hours away from paid work, with Laverne and Shirley, General Mills, and Burger King, rather than in liberative play, creative craftsmanship, or emancipatory dialogue. Until critical theory devises adequate strategies for countering the effects of hierarchically dominated mass media, the return of the repressed will be delayed, and linguistic therapy will remain a valuable but marginal venture.⁴

*At once more encompassing and less radical than
Marcuse's view, Habermas's version of critical
theory focuses directly on the problem of linguistic
domination and the question of communicative competence.*

Thus, he maintains, "Today the problem of language has replaced the traditional problem of consciousness" (10, p. 220). Like Marcuse, Habermas is concerned with the way science has been used to extend the hold of linguistic domination. Specifically, he is interested in the way expert technical and managerial knowledge is used by those in power to disenfranchise citizen participation in political debates by fostering the impression that many issues are inherently too complex for a layperson to comprehend or debate competently. According to Habermas, this disenfranchisement has led to the collapse of "the public sphere" and passive acceptance of technocratic elitism. Thus, he claims, all modern governments, whether capitalist or socialist, violate the terms of classic social contract theories of state power. None are legitimated by dialogic consensus.

Rejecting Chomsky's pursuit of linguistic universals as ill-conceived, Habermas arrives at a theory of knowledge that bears striking resemblance to Burke's rhetoric (5). (Both propose pragmatic definitions of

⁴ Some post-Marcusian critical theorists, such as John O'Neill (23) and Claus Mueller (21, 22), have recognized the role mass media play in perpetuating repressed or distorted communication and in reinforcing social stratification of communicative competences. But there have been no systematic attempts to integrate critical theory's social-psychological perspective on political linguistics and the structural approaches of other neo-Marxian communication theorists.

truth founded in dialogue.) Habermas maintains that truth can only be secured pragmatically: it is founded upon consensus that is realized in discourse. For Habermas, truth means “warranted assertability.” He contends that a “model of pure communicative action (interaction)” presupposes that all parties involved in an interaction are accountable: that their beliefs are intentional and that they are capable of justifying their beliefs and norms. But he points out that the monologic actions of contemporary institutions do not fit this model. Therefore, Habermas maintains, these institutional acts are embedded in systematically distorted communication:

The barriers to communication which make a fiction precisely of the reciprocal imputation of accountability support at the same time the belief in legitimacy which sustains the fiction and prevents it being found out. That is the paradoxical achievement of ideologies, whose individual prototype is the neurotic disturbance (15, p. 140).

Ideological legitimations of ideas and states are secured in monologic fictions. They are based upon false or forced consensus: hence the Orwellian deformations of the vocabulary of modern politics. Habermas argues that a genuine, rationally motivated consensus can be reached only if the conditions of an “ideal speech situation” can be anticipated during legitimating discourses. He regards the semantic analysis of the classic (Freudian) psychoanalytic dialogues of patient and therapist as prototypes of the ideal, reflexive speech situation. In an ideal speech situation, Habermas contends, all potential participants must have equal chances to initiate and perpetuate discourses; all participants must have equal opportunities to criticize, ground, or refute all statements, explanations, interpretations, and justifications; and discourse must be free from the external constraints of domination, e.g., violence, threats, sanctions. If these conditions prevail, the preconditions for a rational order will be met. If these conditions are also realized *within* the actual course of the dialogue, the resulting consensus will be free of internal and external constraints. It will be based upon *the power of the best argument*.

Habermas does not bar instrumental arguments from the arena of debate; he merely tries to ensure that other arguments can be heard. The ideal speech situation is the end, the goal, of Habermas’s emancipatory project. In Marcuse’s critical theory, linguistic therapy and exploration of the aesthetic dimensions of dialogue were merely prologue, means whereby more humane visions of social organization might be articulated. Habermas’s work is an apology for more rationality and more democracy in interactions between dominators and the dominated. It does not promise an end to domination. It offers no strategies for countering the massive agenda-setting machinery of today’s culture industry. Habermas successfully demonstrates the importance of lan-

guage and communication in legitimating knowledge and power. He does not successfully transcend positivism and instrumentalism. Therefore, he has been correctly labeled a "right-wing Marxist" or a "radical Liberal" (3, p. 201).

Habermas has clarified the issues, and the impasse in the emancipatory project of his critical theory is not an impasse in critical theory per se.

Ben Agger (2) has offered an impressive synthesis of the ideas of Habermas, Marcuse, and Bruce Ackerman. In Agger's critical theory, dialogue is regarded as both a means to discrediting and overcoming repressive institutional arrangements and as "an imaginative model—a telos—of free human activity" (p. 7). Like Habermas, Agger contends that technocratic capitalism is supported by a scientization of ideology that not only discourages dialogues between laypeople and experts, but encourages a "socially structured silence" among citizens. He contends that "the monopoly of capital goes hand in hand with the monopoly both of information and of dialogue-chances" (p. 9).

Agger's synthesis has three essential components: (a) a conversational basis for delegitimizing a repressive social order through which the powerless can engage the powerful in justificatory dialogues, (b) a critique of the ideology of technocratically induced silence that uses the public experience of delegitimation as a means of generating more sophisticated political dialogues, and (c) an outline of concrete social and political action in which the human capacity for competent involvement in person-nature, person-symbol, and person-person dialogues is affirmed. Ackerman's "Neutral Dialogue" provides the first component, Habermas's critical theory, the second, and Agger's conception of dialogue as an exemplar of free human activity, the third.

Ackerman's "Neutral Dialogue" provides an independent criterion for identifying illegitimate, nonrational, "constrained power talk."

Constrained power talk entails failure to engage in dialogue or, once engaged, to offer rational justifications for one's advantaged position. According to Ackerman (1, pp. 10–11):

A power structure is illegitimate if it can be justified only through a conversation in which some person (or group) must assert that he is (or they are) the privileged moral authority; Neutrality. No reason is a good reason if it requires the power holder to assert:

(a) that his conception of the good is better than that asserted by any of his fellow citizens, or

(b) that regardless of his conception of the good, he is intrinsically superior to one or more of his fellow citizens.

Pulling rank, citing credentials instead of reasons, using technical data to obfuscate, and invoking procedural rules to mute or deflect justificatory dialogues are, by definition, illegitimate, repressive communications, violations of democratically grounded free speech. As Ackerman puts it, "A sustained silence or a stream of self-contradictory noises are decisive signs that something very wrong is going on" (p. 8).

Ackerman is not a critical theorist. He posits his conception of "Neutral Dialogue" in an attempt to breathe new life into liberalism. However, he demonstrates that, by virtue of their monologic stances, most existing liberal institutions are illegitimate. He provides a perspective for principled recognition of corruption, but no program for purging corruption. He is interested in the ground rules of free speech, not in the sociology of communicative competence. Thus, he has nothing to say about socially stratified inequalities in educational and linguistic opportunities which, according to sociologists like Basil Bernstein (4), cause the disadvantaged to abstain from participation in public forums. Habermas's perspective, however, criticizes technocratically induced silence and encourages the powerless to respond to failed justificatory dialogues by developing communicative competence and thereby renewing political dialogues and actions.

Agger, like Marcuse, sees the first step—identifying illegitimate power relations—and the second step—developing communicative competence—as prologue to the third step—articulating a new sensibility that replaces instrumental control with humanistic productive and organizational relations grounded in dialogue liberated from repression. Thus, Agger contends: "Communicative competence in this sense is nothing less than a competence to manage all the facets of our lives, in transcendence of an ideology that robs us both of our political voices and our substantive social and economic freedom of self creation" (2, p. 28). It is not just the power to generate fluent reports or warranted assertions; it is the power to transform ourselves and the world. This power does not necessarily preclude hierarchy. But it does require responsiveness secured in egalitarian dialogues. Thus, in contrast to historical (Marxist-Leninist) socialism, it insists that the process and product of socialism must not be divorced. The end, democratic socialism, is justified only if it is secured by democratic means: egalitarian dialogic processes.

What Paulo Friere (8) has done for those repressed by neocolonial structures, Agger does for the disenfranchised of technocratic structures. He provides them with a dialogic warrant for recovering their voices and discovering their competences. Agger's synthesis transcends the praxeological sterility and elitist tendencies of the first wave of critical theory. The standard of Neutral Dialogue, as radicalized by Agger, advances critical theory beyond mere ideological critique. It provides a practical

interactional test of the symmetry (and democracy) of dialogic relationships: not just political relationships, but also the organization of work and of social and domestic relationships. Moreover, it provides a prophylaxis against vanguardism: the perennial problem of the Left whereby the socialist vision is distorted and betrayed by leaders who predicate their claims to speak for the people on a refusal to listen to the people.

Agger is interested in encouraging the repressed to speak for themselves, to make policy. Therefore, he does not examine in a concrete way the policy implications of institutionalizing Neutrality, although he does suggest that it would revolutionize the division of labor in society. But, as I read them, minimally, they would seem to suggest that, in a truly democratic state, all institutional spokespersons would be instructed in the rules of Neutral Dialogue rather than in the principles of advertising, public relations, and technocratic management. The institutions of such a state would be structured to maximize opportunities for generating justificatory dialogues. Racism, sexism, and ageism would be outlawed as violations of the terms of Neutral Dialogue. A primary responsibility of the press would be to report breaches of the rules of Neutral Dialogue by those in positions of power *as violations of their trust*. The press itself would have to rethink its covenant because, by definition, the hierarchical concentration of control of mass media that prevails in technocratic societies is an abrogation of Neutrality.

Similarly, the press's claim to the superior moral authority of "journalistic objectivity" would have to be abandoned. Copyrights, royalties, patents, and other reified concepts of information ownership would also be discredited. Present trends toward privatization of information resources would be reversed. A new international information order would be established that would bear little resemblance to that presently envisioned by either its proponents or opponents. The culture industry, as we know it, with its monologic programming, would talk itself out of existence, and the knowledge industry would manufacture a new warrant through which scientists would invent less manipulative relationships with nature, objects, and people, and thereby articulate more nurturing vocabularies of motive and expression. Clearly, this simple—eminently reasonable—paradigm for free speech is a very radical idea—perhaps as radical as ideas like "freedom," "equality," "justice," and "liberalism" were in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

But, in my judgment, Neutral Dialogue will remain a utopian idea until critical theory develops an adequate theory of mass media.

Agger's synthesis is a preliminary formulation. But, like the sources upon which it is built, it lacks a theory of mass media. Without such a theory, Agger's critique of "monopolies both of information and of

dialogue-chances” is incomplete. The time is right for a rapprochement of the two branches of neo-Marxian communication studies: the critical theory inspired by the Frankfurt School, and the media-critical theory of such scholars as Smythe, Schiller, Hamelink, Tuchman, and Gitlin. But the clock is ticking. As Herbert Schiller points out, “The new electronic industries, the changing sites of industrial production, and instantaneous international communication are imposing a new form of hierarchical organization on much of the world” (24, p. 2). Neutral Dialogue can provide the incentive for, and means to, an integration of the critical perspectives of these two factions of independent neo-Marxism.

Realization of Neutral Dialogue will not sever the knot that binds power and knowledge. Paris will always be more than just Paris. But Neutral Dialogue may be our best hope for exorcising surplus repression and achieving the telos of dialogue, so that, as in Burke’s *Dialectician’s Hymn* (6, pp. 448–449), “we give true voice”:

*Cooperating in the competition
Until our naming
Gives voice correctly
And how things are
And how we say they are
Are one.*

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