Right to the city and urban resistance in Turkey: A comparative perspective

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RIGHT TO THE CITY AND URBAN RESISTANCES IN TURKEY: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Summary: Since 2000s, Turkey witnesses an intensive urban transformation in metropolitan cities. This transformation led by the AKP government itself with neoliberal perspectives of urbanisation targets generally informal and/or old, dilapidated neighbourhoods located in the city centre with high estate values but occupied by low-income inhabitants belonging often to ethnic and religious minorities.

Against this massive urban transformation, many local resistances flourished with different motivations and claims but the common point is that they reclaimed all a right to the city, a right to exist in the city with their everyday life habits and to access to the city's amenities by refusing to be relocated in the peripheral areas. The objective of this chapter will be to study the dynamics of these urban resistances, the perception and the appropriation of the space by inhabitants and how the concept of the right to the city is mobilised by them. I propose to study the case of May Day neighbourhood in Istanbul which is an

informal and autonomous neighbourhood created by extreme-left political organisations in 1970. The second example is the case of Dikmen Valley in Ankara created also in the same manner of May Day in 1970s but lost progressively its political identity. This neighbourhood ethnically diverse mobilised also against an urban transformation project. My aim will be to compare these two case in their comprehension of the right to the city, tools of mobilisation and perception of their neighbourhood and everyday life in the city.

Introduction

In his book, the Production of Space, Henri Lefebvre was explaining that 'the space serves as an instrument of thought and action; it is at the same time a means of production, a means of control, hence of domination and power, but it partially escapes, as such, from those whom it serves' (1974: 35). This statement shows how it is complicated for a specific actor to control entirely la production of space and even if public and private actors want to design the space according to their own objectives whether it is political or for-profit, there could be always other kind of power relations and attempts of resistance from inhabitants and/or civil society in order to participate to their design. The interaction of all these actors often transform the urban space and this transformed space constraints also these actors to adapt constantly their behaviour, tactics and strategies in order to maintain their place and influence.

This chapter has the objective to show how this interaction between different actors for the appropriation of space takes place in Turkey especially in the context of neoliberal urban planning under the rule of Party of Justice and Developpement (AKP) since 2003. I propose to analyse this interaction under the angle of the concept of right to the city and spatial

justice. Drawing on Lefebvre's theory, I think that the both concepts are highly related and complimentary. Edward Soja who largely brought back Lefebvre's thought in urban studies by his theory of spatial turn emphasizes this relationship:

'Paris in the 1960s and especially the still understudied co-presence of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, become the most generative site for the creation of a radically new conceptualization of space and spatiality, and for a specifically urban and spatial concept of justice, encapsulated most insightfully in Lefebvre's call for taking back control over the right to the city and the right to difference' (Soja 2009).

The purpose of this chapter is to study different urban resistances in Turkey in the light of right to the city and spatial justice and to analyse how these concepts are perceived and mobilised by inhabitants. My field study is based on two neighbourhoods, Dikmen Valley in Ankara and May Day neighbourhood in Istanbul, both composed mostly by informal settlements. Their creation and development were similar. The both neighbourhoods have been emerged by the housing need of rural people coming from different cities of Anatolia in 1970s and at the beginning the first settlements have been founded by the initiative of radical left revolutionary groups relatively powerful in metropolitan cities during this period. The both neighbourhoods have therefore an important political and collective action heritage. Another common point is that they have now a high estate value and are threatened by large-scale urban transformation projects. Unsurprisingly, a part of inhabitants in this neighbourhoods organise for several years resistance and mobilisation in order to protect their life spaces and houses and to participate to the decision process of these projects.

In the following sections, I will present in detail these neighbourhoods by locating them in the context of neoliberal urban planning in Turkey. Then, I will focus on the emergence of different forms of resistances despite their

similarities. The right to the city and the attempt of the appropriation of space will be central to my purpose.

Informal neighbourhoods in the newly restructured urban system

Urbanization in Turkey can be explained through three historical phases; the period before 1980, the period between 1980 and 2001, and the period after 2001. The first phase corresponds to the beginning of urbanization in the 1950s, and it is clearly related to the high rate of rural migration (Öncü, 1988). This period is marked by the absence of public policy on housing. The housing question was never entirely addressed as a policy in the political agenda of changing governments, and housing needs was long-time managed by individual initiatives by constructing informal settlements called generally *gecekondus* in Turkey (Türkün, 2011).

In the past two decades, metropolitan cities in Turkey have become central to the reproduction and continual development of neoliberalism itself, constituting increasingly important geographical targets and laboratories for a variety of neoliberal policy experiments, all aimed at increasing the value of the land. This process, observed in many cities in the world, is particularly accelerated in Turkey during the AKP rule and became even the main tool for economic growth. The AKP decided to restructure the governance of Turkish real-estate markets and urban planning through the implementation of a number of legal and institutional reforms, with significant consequences for the socioeconomic geography of cities and the rural environment. Social policies in the city and the search for spatial justice fostering social diversity and support for disadvantaged populations are gradually downgraded. It also combined neoliberal strategies to the conservative-Islamist restructuring of the urban space.

Neoliberal urban regeneration policies have three major characteristics in order to legitimize this process and to reduce potential resistance channels.

First, they are supported by a wide range of legal framework as indicated above that government adapt according to needs and conditions. Secondly, urban security discourses are used for these policies in the public opinion in order to legitimate human consequences like forced displacements and house destructions. Thirdly, this neoliberal restructuring of cities in Turkey has an authoritarian character since it ignores the demands and desires of the majority of residents namely lower-middle and poor classes and privilege the market priorities in order to integrate Istanbul in global economic, financial and cultural flows.

To ensure a sustainability to the construction sector considered as the catalyser of economic growth, all *gecekondu* areas, and old "unhealthy" neighbourhoods have been opened to the regeneration and gentrification (Türkün 2011). The neighbourhoods inhabited by the city's poorest, which at the same time carry the highest potential in terms of the rising value of urban land, are refashioned by local municipalities and the Mass Housing Administration of Turkey (TOKI) in order to launch urban transformation projects. In this sense, the neoliberal restructuring of the urban space raises some questions about the meaning, the production and the appropriation of the space by those who structure it and those who live in it. Lefebvre argues that the production of space not only manifests various forms of injustice but also produces and reproduces them, thereby maintaining established relations of domination and oppression (Lefebvre, 1974: 41).
In this perspective, social classes with low incomes occupying old and unhealthy neighbourhoods and the inner-city *gecekondus* are now considered undesirable. Current urban renewal projects displace these communities in order to confine them to new resettlement areas far away from their previous neighbourhoods. This is observable in many urban projects in Istanbul where the inhabitants are the last ones to know about the content of these. This process refers what Lefebvre calls difference of

perception between conceived and perceived space which is often adversarial in capitalist urbanisation (Lefebvre 1974).

In an urban space conceived in a neoliberal logic based on market value of place and without a participative process taking into account needs and desires of inhabitants, neighbourhood becomes the place where many social groups (minorities, political and/or religious groups etc.) creates enclaves wherein their identity is recognized without repression, and these environments enhance the development of a relatively shared identity, connected to the neighbourhood, inside the community. Many inhabitants, especially in informal neighbourhoods concerned by several planning projects, try to organize resistance even if it is sometimes weak and not a general reaction. This is the case of Dikmen Valley and May Day Neighbourhood. These communities have sometimes organized themselves in independent structures and developed their own local protests. Their protest campaigns and their daily, unspectacular survival strategies challenge the connection between urbanization and civilization as claimed in neoliberal "development" concepts (Mayer 2012: 79). In other words, the state's desire to renew these areas constitutes a direct threat to the community's shared identity, thereby triggering resistance in order to protect it. Resistance, here, is understood as active but also passive and sometimes invisible actions, strategies and tactics used by inhabitants individually or collectively in everyday life in order to protect their way of life and the social and cultural specificities of their community which are widely shaped inside their neighbourhood. In this article, this type of resistance is analysed in connection with the right to the city that Lefebvre developed in order to explain the right of all people living in the city to participate to decisions concerning their everyday life and to exist with their own life-styles, identity and cultural habits in the city. The right to the city is considered than as a resistance to the standardisation of city life. Michel de Certeau (1980) analyses this as tactics used by the "weak" through which

everyday spatial hegemonies are covertly transgressed, identity is projected through claims to a particular space of power which is neighbourhood. Two cases from Turkey is selected in order to discuss this relationship between neoliberal city and right to the city due to the intensive neoliberal urbanization undertaken by the AKP government and because this process has dramatically affected the living environments of these different communities.

Figure: May Day and Dikmen Valley Neighbourhoods

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The first case, May Day Neighbourhood (the name was unofficially given by inhabitants to refer to the Labor Day) is a poor working-class neighbourhood situated on a hill in the Ümraniye district of Istanbul. The urban transformation of the Ümraniye district, whose inhabitants live mainly in *gecekondus*, is one of the priorities of the Metropolitan Town Hall of Istanbul, largely due to this area's geological resistance to earthquakes. Attempts have been made to destroy the shantytowns on several occasions in the past, but each met with a high level resistance from the May Day neighbourhood.This location, close to two of the city's main motorways and the new location of the National Bank of Turkey, is only fifteen minutes away from the Bosphorus by car, making it extremely desirable to the private construction industry (Gülhan, 2011). This neighbourhood, located on the Asian side of the city, grew cumulatively in the 1970s via the *gecekondus* built by economic migrants from rural Anatolia. Initially the building plots were sold by the land mafia, but from 1976, left-wing socialist organizations started to settle in the neighbourhood. During the second half of the 1970s, control of the neighbourhood passed over to these political organizations, resulting in land distribution which favoured dissenting families, particularly the Alevis from the Kurdish cities of Tunceli, Kahramanmaraş and Sivas. The Alevis are one of the main

religious minorities in Turkey and they interpret Islam in a secular way, have their religious rituals being dramatically different from Sunnite interpretations and they are often politically close to kemalist left in Turkey (Massicard, 2012). In May Day, various services and institutions were gradually established across the *gecekondus*, all designed and managed by the residents, including popular committees, community centres, schools and co-operatives for purchasing food, fuel and construction materials. The district earned a reputation for political dissidence by repelling the gecekondu demolition teams three times in the1970s, making it a site of resistance in the public imagination. However, after the military coup d'état of 1980, in 1983, the neighbourhood was "legalised" by the military regime which took over its control. A *muhtar* (legal administrator democratically elected)   was elected and the neighbourhood was renamed Mustafa Kemal, which remains its official name today. In 2008 the neighbourhood was divided and each portion attached to a different district, so that the historic May Day neighbourhood now composes parts of the Aşık Veysel and Mustafa Kemal neighbourhoods attached to the Ataşehir district. Even so, kinship networks between people coming from the same Anatolian city are still important, with many hometown associations still operating in the area (Toumarkine, Hersant, 2005).

The second neighbourhood is Dikmen Valley in Ankara. Initially, what is now called the Dikmen Valley was a small village with some vineyard gardens, relatively far from the city centre of Ankara (new capital of the young Republic of Turkey), designed in 1928 according to the urbanization plans of German planner Herman Jansen. These plans were based on a city of 300,000 inhabitants by the 1980s and planned to preserve the village of Dikmen and its surroundings in order to maintain its agricultural activities, and to preserve green areas.

The strong demographic pressure, unexpected and therefore not anticipated, rendered Jansen's plans obsolete. The urgent and massive need for housing for rural migrants, expecting to find jobs in the new capital, has gradually widened the city's borders and the Dikmen Valley is one of the areas where *gecekondus* have multiplied starting from 1960s. The construction of these dwellings were accelerated in 1970s under the impulse of the left-wing radical groups who were looking for unoccupied lands in various ankariot districts in order to distribute them - sometimes by using force - to working-class immigrants. This tendency was observable in many other neighbourhoods in metropolitan cities of the country such as Mamak Tuzluçayır in Ankara, May Day or Gazi neighbourhoods in Istanbul and Gültepe in Izmir. In the case of Dikmen, the neighbourhood was composed by people coming from different cities of Central Anatolia like Çankırı, Çorum ou Sivas. Some of them were Alevis as in May Day but the majority of inhabitants were Sunnites. Before the launch of the project, the ethnic, religious and political diversity of the neighbourhood had as a corollary the absence of organized political actions or political consciousness which was able to generate collective solidarity. Compared to May Day, the different parts of the neighbourhood were not interacting daily. Some respondents on this point highlight, for example, the tendency of families from the same Anatolian city to gather together by constructing their houses next to each other. Daily exchanges related to the use of the grocer, the bus stop or the neighbourhood cafe existed, but in the absence of a common risk of destruction of their homes or life spaces, they were limited. Everyone preferred to live their sociality in his street, with his neighbours, the people he knew by his family or town of origin.

At its creation, the Dikmen Valley is hardly connected to the city centre of Ankara and difficult to access. It has no basic infrastructure or service such as roads, electricity networks or water. Moreover, the connections to these

latter two services are carried out clandestinely. Due to the rapid increase in population and *gecekondus*, policymakers were finally forced to administratively recognize the neighbourhood during 1980s and provide basic public services. Some of the inhabitants of *gecekondus* even manage to obtain certificates of ownership from the municipality during this period. If these above mentioned decisions were necessary in view of the size of the neighbourhood and the population, they also largely meet electoral considerations: with the legalization of the building and the recognition of the district, successive governments hoped to obtain votes.

In the early 1990s, the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality and the Çankaya Municipality, both led by the People's Republican Party (CHP), decided to carry out an urban renovation and included the Dikmen Valley project in the master plans of Ankara in 1989. At the beginning, this renovation project is rather participative and tries to respect the right of owners. But, the project evolve in 2000s, under the AKP rule of Ankara and became entirely a "for-profit" housing project and the new mayor refuses to cooperate and to negotiate with inhabitants.

Compared to May Day neighbourhood known for its historical political involvement in the 1970s and for the presence of activists affiliated to various extreme left political organizations, politicization of a large part of the inhabitants of Dikmen seems to be more closely linked to the spatial changes and stigmatization. The neighbourhood constitutes a life space in which ties, networks and social solidarities are forged and contributes, to a large extent, to the socialization of individuals. It thus plays an important role in the process of identifying individuals, particularly in the sense attributed to it during collective mobilization and resistance. As a result, any attempt to transform and destroy it is seen by a part of the inhabitants as a threat to their existence within the city.

In Dikmen Valley, as in May Day, ordinary people are mobilized in a context characterized by permanent social uncertainty and urgency, like the efficiencies of basic equipment and services. These two districts constitute zones of economic, social and communitarian segregation and could be considered also as differentiated spaces, in lefebvrian sense as they have a historical political heritage and a collective identity construction related to the belonging to their neighbourhood different from the other parts of the city. In both cases the municipal authorities have sought to change the composition of these neighbourhoods by destroying the *gecekondus*. The police forces have confronted the inhabitants several times either to destroy houses or to repress political mobilisation related to some commemorative events like 2 Septembre 1977 resistance in May Day neighbourhood against the destruction of gecekondus, even causing the deaths of protestors in the case of 1 Mayis. In both instances, public organizations have been unable to transform these districts either culturally or politically.

These confrontations have also come at a cost for the inhabitants. The precariousness of the housing, due to the constant risk of demolition, and the resultant difficulty in accessing safe and legal housing, remain common problems in both districts. In the following section, I will explore the place of right to the city concept in the development of these neighbourhood resistance and especially the sense this concept represents for inhabitants in both neighbourhood.

Right to the city in Neighbourhoods' Resistances

Lefebvre perceived the right to the city as a way of legitimating "the refusal to allow oneself to be removed from urban reality by a discriminatory and segregative organisation" (1996: 197). For Lefebvre, the urban is not simply limited to the boundaries of a city, but includes its social system of production. Hence the right to the city is a claim for the recognition of the urban as the (re)producer of social relations of power, and the right to

participation in it (Gilbert and Dikeç 2008). In that sense, the right to the city could be described as a right to the appropriation and the participation of the inhabitants. As Marcuse explains, it is, at the same time, 'a right to produce the city as well as to enjoy it, and two are integrally linked. It is not only the right to a choice of what is produced after it is produced, but a right to determine what is produced and how it is produced and to participate in its production' (2012, 36).

Lefebvre's conception of the 'right to the city' is for dwellers to retain the ability to produce their spaces without conforming to the dominant modes of spatial production, and to participate in reshaping the existing norms and forces in which space is being produced within the neoliberal order, rather than being themselves engulfed in those modes (Fawaz 2009).

The concept of right to the city in this sense has been introduced in Turkey by some urban activists and their organisations and transmitted to inhabitants in their collaboration to resist against urban projects. These activists are often urban planners and architects with Marxist ideas, defending an alternative vision of city making against that of public and private actors of urbanisation. They are often members of *Union of Chambers of Architectes and Engineers* or associations like *Solidarity Atelier* or *One Hope.* In the case of May Day and Dikmen Valley, these organisations were present at the beginning of the mobilisation but leaved progressively the place to inhabitants themselves but also to leftist political groups. In any case, the inhabitants used the term combining it to spatial justice. During the mobilisation, they build neighbourhood associations, and these associations, thanks to their interaction with professional activists, develop their own discourse of justice and right to the city. Actually the sense of the term was present from the very beginning of the resistance as the mobilisation was never limited to housing rights but broadly to the right to exist in the city with the choice of life space, the access of all city

facilities and the right to exist with their own cultural and political tools and social relations. For one of the urban activists:

'The right to the city is a revolutionary right, not a mere right of dwelling; right to access to centrality or to the urban services. It must be elaborated as related to the use-value of space with a democratic urban imagination. Urban struggle must aim the right to the city, targeting a more democratic, just city based on the use value' (Ergin, 2014).

Concretely, the both neighbourhood I study started to resist globally to urban transformation projects from 2007. Contrary to Dikmen Valley, May Day was not directly threatened but with the construction of a large gated community opposite to the neighbourhood, rumors started to be diffused about the future of this informal settlement which was the target of State for several years because of political and cultural reasons, and the opportunity of its high estate value as mentioned before. Because of the iconic case of Sulukule, romani neighbourhood which was destroyed and gentrified entirely by a State-led urban project (Lelandais 2013), inhabitants in May Day were convinced to stay mobilised and to be ready to defend their neighbourhood against destruction attempts. The importance to resist is underlined by one of the founders who still remains in 1 Mayis as following:

'I think we should make live our neighbourhood because we earned it by the blood of our comrades. There are resistance memories in every corner of it. This neighbourhood marked our social memory. It gives always a place for revolutionary activities and leads the production of progressive ideas. Despite all problems and political measures targeting the neighbourhood, it is still a revolutionary and red neighbourhood' (Hüseyin, age 60, interviewed in 2011).

Neighbourhood cements a shared identity related to the place among residents, but not just in relation to the specific codes and practices

associated with ethnicity. This identification is also enriched by the traditional customs, social networks, rituals, symbols, collective memories and mechanisms of mutual aid that exist only within the physical living environment of that community. According to an inhabitant:

'May Day is a place where there is no oppression and where everybody can find their place and live. It's a left-wing neighbourhood. The human being is central to the vision of people here. I understand the value of May Day when I'm outside. Other neighbourhoods are stand-offish, conservative. Individual rights are limited. When I come back here, I relax. In May Day, there are opportunities for people to develop themselves. They [state institutions] tried to destruct it but they didn't succeed. (Kamil, age 41, inhabitant of May Day).

In May Day, the inhabitants argued that state agencies were seeking to pervert the revolutionary character of their neighbourhood by encouraging criminal activity. For them, this was a government strategy for stigmatizing May Day in order to legitimize an urban transformation project, so their action was focused on this issue. A neighbourhood website was created with the title "Against degeneration, defend your neighbourhood" (this site does not exist anymore). Regular meetings are held by the two main political organisations, the Socialist Party of Oppressed People and the Revolutionary Popular Front, and the cultural association 2 September organises cultural events, dramas, study programmes and an annual festival in order to maintain the neighbourhood's collective identity. In this case, collective action appears to be in keeping with a highly charged and constantly reiterated local history, allowing the district to remain in a state of a permanent memorial mobilization. Resistance is framed and organized by one or two political organizations that control access to the neighbourhood, both physically and in relation to land and property ownership, so the protest is not generated externally. There are often

confrontations between the police and young activists, mainly members of the Revolutionary Popular Front, some of whose members are currently serving custodial sentences.

In the case of Dikmen Valley this leftist character is rather in the backside of the mobilisation even if the role leftist activists and their historical capital of activism is undeniable in the organisation of resistance. The specificity of Dikmen Valley was the primary role of inhabitants and especially women in the acts of resistance but also the strong ties established during the resistance between a socialist organisation, *Halkevleri,* whose activists living in the neighbourhood for several years now knew to give a political consciousness around the right to the city to inhabitants. This connection was partial in May Day, a part of inhabitants were tired of street battles engaged by leftist groups against the police. In Dikmen Valley, street battle was only engaged in order to prevent the destruction of the neighbourhood and the resistance was organised entirely by one and unique organisation, *Office for Housing Rights,* which was constituted by inhabitants themselves and whose representatives were chosen by the inhabitants of each street.

The neighbourhood and the city give rise to a strong sense of belonging, and the resistance aims above all to preserve the place and the social and cultural practices of everyday life that are related to it. In the present case, this resistance is expressed by a proclamation of the inhabitants, which reminds us that this territory is theirs and that it is the support of a collective identity. They claim their right to occupy this area, to own it and to preserve it:

'Before this struggle, I did not know many people in the neighbourhood. The struggle has brought us together. Without making religious, linguistic or ethnic distinctions, we have become like sisters to share our misfortunes, our happiness, our hopes. We women have learned that life is not only in our homes but also in the barricades. While we hardly ever go out and end the day between four walls, today we are everywhere. We have learned to

claim the life we desire and not the one we are forced to do. The valley has become a great learning school for women' (Sultan, a woman living in Dikmen Valley, 2013).

In the *Office for Housing Rights*, for example, it was decided that every 'owner' of *gecekondu* should ensure that his garden is beautiful, tidy and welcoming, that everyone should participate in the cleansing of the neighbourhood and commit to not throw away its garbage. The installation of Syrian refugees and waste collectors in abandoned houses was also discussed. The inhabitants believe that the both were incited by the Mayor of Ankara with the aim of creating a conflictual climate in the neighbourhood. However, in order to reinforce their reputation for tolerance and friendliness and to defeat the mayor's strategy, it was decided to accept these newcomers and invite them to meetings in order to establish collective rules of 'live together'. In this strategy, the will of the appropriation of space by inhabitants is clearly present.

In the examples of May Day and Dikmen Valley, resistance opposes both the discrimination apparent in the spatial organization of the city and the rules of institutional citizenship which disciplines space by fixed power relations. The inhabitants of these threatened neighbourhoods organize resistance through what Michel de Certeau (1990) defines as the "tactics" of making do. In both May Day and Dikmen Valley, the inhabitants who were interviewed emphasized the particular character of their neighbourhood, and the strong solidarity of its residents. Through this discourse, their living-space was used to construct and reflect another vision of the neighbourhood, far away from its common image of being an undesirable area. Through their everyday rituals, by maintaining their customary habits and by creating alternative lifestyles, they assert their right to exist in the city.

Conclusion

The example of two neighbourhoods studied in this chapter proposes alternative ways of thinking about the conception and the use of urban space. As Lefebvre points out in La Production de l'Espace, space becomes a place of struggle for its appropriation and conception between public actors and their opponents. In this struggle, the right to the city is chosen as a tool by urban dwellers in order to legitimate their right to 'be' in the city. Neo-liberal hegemony tends to absorb alternative logics and shape them to its ends.

The case studies outlined in this research also show the importance of space and its appropriation through the organization of daily resistance. This means that even the neoliberalisation of public planning is radically reorganizing the supra-urban scalar hierarchies in which cities are embedded; cities thus remain strategic arenas for socio-political struggles (Purcell, 2008). The recent protests organized towards the protection of Gezi Park in Taksim Square in Istanbul during May-June 2013 showed the importance of symbolic spaces (neighbourhoods, squares, parks etc.) in the emergence of resistances as the citadins would not allow top-down public decisions on their life space which is considered as a part of their identity and a mark in their everyday life (Erdi-Lelandais 2016). The acts of resistance described here also show that the appropriation of space is a more complex process than is usually acknowledged. Despite all the tools of physical and symbolic domination wielded by state institutions, social activism and resistance within the city is striving to transform the socio-territorial organization of capitalism itself on multiple geographical scales (Purcell, 2008).

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