Worker-Owned Cooperatives in East Boston*

Social Ethics for Democratic Education

LUZ ZAMBRANO
Center for Cooperative Development and Solidarity, Boston, Massachusetts, United States of America

BERTRAM C. BRUCE
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, Illinois, United States of America

Luz Zambrano came to the United States in 1990 with a college degree, yet she found herself working 70 hours a week cleaning floors and then being cheated of her wages. But unlike many, she could draw from her experience of cooperatives in Colombia (Álvarez 2017, 76) and her knowledge of popular education (Freire 2005) to work for systemic change. She saw firsthand how democracy must be more than formal procedures: it needs to be realized through political empowerment, social and economic justice, dialogue, and education.

Cooperative Movements Worldwide

Jessica Gordon Nembhard (2014, 107) defines "cooperative" as an enterprise owned by the people who use its services. They form a company to satisfy an economic or social need, to provide a quality good or service at an affordable price, or to facilitate more equal distribution or compensation. These needs may include rural electricity, healthy food, affordable housing, or

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access to financial services. Cooperatives are guided by principles such as democratic participation, labor or community control of capital, autonomy, concern for community, and cooperation among cooperatives. Examples include energy and utility cooperatives, co-op grocery stores and pharmacies, cooperative farms, and housing cooperatives. They are differentiated by ownership—consumers, producers, or workers.

Cooperatives in the modern era are linked to the rise of industrial capitalism, which transformed society and threatened the livelihoods of many workers. Cooperative organization of labor and consumers grew in response. The Welsh textile manufacturer Robert Owen extended this impulse, believing in creating a healthy environment for his workers with access to education. He saw ignorance as the foundation of evil. This ignorance was "impressed on the minds of the present generation by its predecessors; and chiefly by that greatest of all errors, the notion that individuals formed their own characters" (Owen 1816/1927, 65).

Owen sought to form "villages of co-operation" where workers would drag themselves out of poverty by growing their own food, making their own clothes, teaching one another, and ultimately becoming self-governing. From the beginning, cooperatives thus manifested the link between democracy and education. Owen implemented one version successfully in the cotton mills of New Lanark, Scotland. The first recognized cooperative store opened there.

In 1825–27, a notable Owenite experiment occurred in New Harmony, Indiana (Pitzer 2011). Although it ultimately failed, it made major contributions to American education and scientific research. It established the first public library, a civic drama club, and a public school system open to men and women. Owen's son Robert Dale Owen sponsored legislation to create the Smithsonian Institution; another son, Richard Owen, was Indiana state geologist and the first president of Purdue University.

In 1844, in Rochdale, England, laborers established a cooperative known as the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers. That cooperative became a model for a movement that now includes more than a billion people around the world ("Cooperative Development Program" 2023). The Rochdale, or similar, principles, such as open and voluntary membership, democratic governance, education of members and the general public, equitable distribution of surplus, and cooperation with other cooperatives, have guided cooperatives since then (Fairbairn 1994). Luz and her colleagues exemplify those principles in their work.

Bob Stone (1998) writes about the relation of cooperativism to capitalism, especially for producer cooperatives. The same group of workers both

produces value and owns the means of production, thus uniting capital and labor in a non-antagonistic manner. The co-op's active workforce hires managers and capital (by jointly taking out loans) instead of being hired by them. A broad cooperative movement, by starting cooperatives and buying out existing enterprises, counters capitalism one firm at a time. They do this by returning all value to those who produce it, by abolishing the market in labor, and by blocking capitalism's creation of class divisions within and between nations. The extent to which it can dismantle capitalism, as he argues, remains to be seen.

Nevertheless, Stone highlights four important contemporary cooperatives that show the enduring, international presence of the movement: (1) in Spain's Basque region, more than 27,000 worker-owners produce high-tech goods through the Mondragon network; (2) in Italy's Emiglia-Romagna region, 2,700 co-ops, run by more than 150,000 worker-owners, are united by political parties oriented toward social change; (3) the Co-op Atlantic federation of 166 purchasing, retailing, producer, housing, and fishing co-ops in Canada employs 5,850 workers and counts more than 170,000 families as members; and (4) the Seikatsu network in Tokyo began as a buying club, and it now includes more than 225,000 member households organized at the neighborhood level and 160 worker-owned producer cooperatives (Stone 1998).

Cooperatives for worker rights, education, health, and social life began in Latin America more than a century ago (Bajo et al. 2017) and have been long-standing in Colombia. Juan Fernando Álvarez (2017) points out that for Colombia, cooperatives contribute "to GDP, to formal public education, to employment . . . [and] access to credit," but they also create "conditions to live in fullness, such as access to a decent living place, education, health, recreation, welfare . . . access to a decent job, democratic participation, concern and action for the community, access to the land and collective action for social inclusion." These cooperatives played an important role in Luz's experiences growing up.

Cooperatives in the United States

In the United States there have been many varieties of co-ops, including the mutual fire insurance company founded in 1752 by Benjamin Franklin; Boston's Workingman's Protective Union, a consumer co-op; and the first credit unions, starting in Massachusetts in 1909. After the Civil War, the Grange movement grew to encourage families to band together to promote the economic and political well-being of the community and agriculture. Many rural communities still have a Grange Hall, which serves as a center

of rural community life ("History of the Cooperative Movement" 2023; Pitman 2018).

Nembhard's (2014) detailed study of Black cooperatives shows their importance for both Black history and cooperative history in general. They began with pre–Civil War efforts to escape slavery and buy freedom. Mutual aid societies acquired funds for hospitalization, funerals, food, clothing, and agricultural communes. Their development is deeply intertwined with the struggle for Black economic independence and success, including the civil rights movement, with influence on W. E. B. Du Bois, Ella Jo Baker, and A. Philip Randolph, among others.

By the late nineteenth century, hundreds of Black worker cooperatives had arisen, most of them based explicitly or implicitly on the Rochdale principles. During the Great Depression, African Americans were creating cooperative factories, stores, housing, and credit unions. Another wave came in the 1960s, especially in the rural South with federal grant funding.

Perhaps the best known is the work of Fannie Lou Hamer. During her activist career Hamer was threatened, arrested, shot at, and beaten, once suffering severe kidney damage. She lost her home and job simply for registering to vote (Brown 2021). In 1968, she created a "pig bank" in Ruleville, Mississippi, to supply "free pigs for Black farmers to breed, raise, and slaughter." The next year she launched a cooperative to purchase land for collective farms. She complemented that with a co-op store, boutique, and sewing enterprise. Many of the low-income housing units she built still exist (Michals 2017).

The exclusion of Black cooperatives from mainstream discourse can be attributed in part to the exclusion of Black history from that discourse. Also, the efforts were often short-lived due to limited resources and sabotage by White competitors. These factors apply to cooperatives for other marginalized groups, including those in East Boston.

Cooperatives in East Boston

In November 2015, Luz's idea of forming worker-owned cooperatives in East Boston was born out of trying to find solutions to the rapid gentrification of the neighborhood. She had escaped the war in Colombia only to experience the hardships of being an undocumented refugee in the United States. But based on her experience of cooperatives in Colombia, she found ways to help herself, her family, and the immigrant community to survive and even thrive.

In 2016, she cofounded the Center for Cooperative Development and Solidarity (CCDS) in East Boston to provide opportunities for decent work with

decent pay for minority, immigrant, and low-income residents (Brannon 2023; Toomer-McAlpine 2023). By supporting worker-owned cooperatives, CCDS enables the creation of a sustainable social and economic justice neighborhood (Mass General News 2023; Solidarity Economy Initiative, n.d.). It seeks democracy through a holistic approach that addresses social, health, and economic life. This work shows that democratic education occurs both within and beyond the classroom, through all activities of daily life.

CCDS helps immigrants launch worker-owned co-ops of all sorts in East Boston. For example, it incubates the Sazón Food Cooperative, creating healthy, authentic Latin cuisine for the community. Other co-ops provide translation and interpretation services; home care services; an organization for cooperative work from home to produce handicrafts, caps, and fabric face masks; and environmentally friendly home and office cleaning.

Shortly after starting CCDS, Luz said:

> We started talking a year ago and now it seems like everything is aligned for co-ops. . . . I feel like this moment is so important for our society to really make a change. . . . At the same time it's a huge challenge, because the ones we want to serve in CCDS have all these obstacles. They are poor, don't speak the language, they don't have documents. . . . But I can see how people are getting excited that finally there is a light that they don't have to be always oppressed. That they can be their own people. (Loh and Jimenez 2017)

The experience of people involved with CCDS and allied organizations provides an excellent model for a more encompassing model of democratic education, one that goes beyond the classroom walls.

An Interview with Luz

This interview took place on September 17, 2023. It has been edited and condensed for length and clarity, with citations added.

> CHIP: What was your early life like?
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> LUZ: I am from Colombia, from a big family. We had seven children. I'm number six. My father was part of a cooperative as I was growing up. From the beginning, without knowing, we were in a different system than the rest of the people around us. We were able to go to school because of the cooperative. It was an employee cooperative; anyone who worked in that bank could join.

My father started as an elevator man. The co-op involved everybody, including the elevator man and the professionals. Everybody had the same opportunity to send their children to the cooperative school, so we all seven went to school, because the public schools in Colombia are not that good. I was able to go to the university, even though my father was working class. The only thing they asked was for us to be good students.

All members of the cooperative could go to the health clinic and receive preventive care. My mom had prenatal care through them. I think we all had good health because of that; we had good care even before we were born. We had so many things—a small supermarket, where we could get food cheaper than in a regular store.

CHIP: What happened when you came to East Boston?

LUZ: I moved to the United States because of the undeclared civil war (Canby 2004). We were all afraid of the unknown every day. There were not many opportunities for women to get jobs in Colombia at that time. Even though the cooperative had helped me in Colombia, the lack of opportunity to work there made me look for opportunities outside of the country. I had to find ways to survive and help my family.

When I got to the [United States], I had to find a job and to send money back to my family. I got into the rhythm of here—you had to work and work and work. I started working as a cleaning worker, even though I had a university degree. It was the only way to get the money that I needed to send back home.

But then I realized that they were taking advantage of us. They weren't paying us for all the hours we worked. I couldn't ask. I didn't know the system. I didn't know the language. But at one point, a friend of mine came to my ex-husband's English class. She said it doesn't matter if you are undocumented or not. You still have rights.

We started learning about our rights. I started organizing my coworkers. Soon, I was fired.

I saw that if you don't have the information, it is hard for you to do anything, even if you feel that something is wrong. Unfortunately, I was fired. But that gave me the whole idea that I needed to learn more. I needed to get enough information and education that I could help other people so that they can fight for their rights.

For a while I worked for Greater Boston Legal Services. I did a lot of immigration work. I helped people to get papers. I started learning about immigration law, labor law, and other things to help me to help my community. I knew that everything could help. I started organizing

my coworkers without knowing what I was doing. After more than 10 years of doing labor and community organizing, a group of us formed the Center to Support Immigrant Organizing (CSIO) to bring people together, to learn that their strength is actually large, to develop the leadership of people, organizations, and communities, creating spaces for peer learning, root cause analysis, and to develop solutions together.

A lot of people don't think that change is possible. They think, "I have to go to school, I have to go to university to learn." But through your life, your work, you have more knowledge than many other people. You are affected by everything that is happening. In CSIO we developed something we called Grassroots Leadership Institutes to build the capacity of leaders for social change work and to promote solidarity among communities and organizations. We do pre-learning, where we each share what know. We were all both teachers and students.

CHIP: What is life like for immigrants in East Boston?

LUZ: I have lived here in East Boston for 28 years. When I arrived, it was mainly immigrants from Italy, Ireland, Cambodia, China, Brazil. Then there were new immigrants from South America, including myself. I have seen how the neighborhood has changed from that time. Ten years ago, the neighborhood started a rapid gentrification. People with money have moved in, and working-class people cannot afford to live, buy, or rent anymore, because it is so expensive.

At the end of 2015, six families lost their house. They had to be moved to the basement of a church. The whole community brought food and clothing. When I went there I felt like the people were so desperate, without hope. You're already doing work, cleaning, taking care of children, cooking, and you're doing all these things already for somebody else.

At that moment I asked them the question, What if we think about doing that for ourselves? Same work. We will have control over how much we make and how we do the work, and we will be owners of our destiny. All the things that I had growing up were coming back to my mind. Everybody deserves that—education, food, and ability to buy a house. I was bringing my past to the present.

CHIP: What is the biggest challenge for the community?

LUZ: It's a combination of many things: access to education, language barriers, immigration status, economic barriers. Also, just as happened to me, when you get to a new place, you don't know where to go, what to do, who you have to talk to. For a lot of people, it takes a while before they can find the right venue to get information,

to get educated, and take action. Also, people are afraid. People take advantage of them at work, but they're afraid to say anything, because they'll lose their job.

CHIP: How does CCDS help start cooperatives?

LUZ: In Colombia, the government supports the cooperatives. The cooperatives are recognized. That doesn't happen here. We went to the city of Boston at that time and talked with them about the idea to do this. They were like "Well, you know, we don't know what exactly you're talking about." So our vision didn't fit the system. They are more open now to cooperatives, but when they discuss cooperatives they always talk about the business side of the cooperative. For us, the cooperative is much more than a business; it's social, cultural, and political.

The first thing we did was to establish a cooperative institute. Our curriculum goes from why we are doing this, what are the roots of the problems we face and how we see cooperativism as an alternative to, we discuss about capitalism and solidarity economy, and how cooperativism is tied to solidarity economy. When we talk about those things, we're not just talking about business. We are talking about a system that supports the community socially, politically, economically, and culturally, and we talk how in that system people are valuable. It puts humans at the center, not profits. That's the difference between the capitalist system and solidarity economy.

The goal is that everybody from the bottom up can benefit. To do a business, you need a business plan and need money. But when you're trying to do cooperativism with these values and principles, it takes a lot of time, especially if you are going against the system and really want to do this for social and economic change.

CHIP: It's sad that you have to even make the case that we should support one another.

LUZ: When you talk about cooperativism as we do, many people think you are communist. But no, we are not; it's simply about actually doing better for humankind.

CHIP: Archbishop Dom Hélder Câmara, an advocate of liberation theology, said, "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist" (Evans 2020).

LUZ: Yeah, it describes our experience perfectly!

In my 33 years here, I came to the conclusion that when you ask for support, if they feel that you are kind of a victim, support could come easily. But if you are trying to build something, they question it: "We

want to keep you as you are. We don't want you to become independent or to become a whole person."

CHIP: Can you say something about the Boston Immigrant Cooperative Alliance (BICA; Mayor's Office for Immigrant Advancement 2023) and how you're working to help community members develop English and other skills?

LUZ: From the beginning of our work, we acknowledged that one of the areas we need to overcome is the English language. So, we went to English for New Bostonians (2024). They were part of the city at one point but are now a nonprofit. We asked, "Do you have any way we can work together?" At that time, they didn't have any funds. But later one staff we talked to at that time connected us with the director when Massachusetts General Hospital issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for English skills for workers. She said maybe this is an opportunity to do what you asked me before. We can form an alliance with the Mayor's Office for Immigrant Advancement, with a school here in East Boston.

The school [Harborside Community School] had the teachers who adapted the curriculum to our needs. So, we did the alliance to help and document what we were doing. We decided to have classes to help the immigrants who were ready to be there. They already had an idea of what we were doing, of the steps to form a co-op. This is the third year. Every 20 weeks we start with a new group. We don't ask people to speak English to be part of a cooperative, that's not a requirement. But we show that if they learn English, it will be better.

CHIP: What stands in the way of doing more of what you'd like to do?

LUZ: One challenge for English classes is the wide range of levels. Some get what they need for a while but then stop. There are few opportunities for them to practice.

A huge challenge was the pandemic, when the classes moved online. Some of the people were not computer literate; some didn't have money for internet service. The alliance gave them a Chromebook, so everybody had a Chromebook, and everybody had a gift card to participate in the class. I think it was $30 for internet so they can actually function. We had to figure out who needed help, and we couldn't go to the house. Some participants are professionals and have their own computer, but others are not. So, we began to send one person masked to help people at home get started with their computers.

But I have to say that during the pandemic is when our organization grew the most. People lost their jobs; they didn't have any income.

Something clicked in their minds like "We were trying to set up a co-op before the pandemic, and now we have more time to make it real because the system is failing us." They saw that the system wasn't supporting them. Most people didn't have any support from the government during the pandemic. So, we had to be very creative. Those who worked in restaurants started making things at home, like pupusas and pizzas. We became the center for communication. We got together with organizations in East Boston and created something called Mutual Aid.

It was a way for us to communicate with the community about things like how to wear a mask and why it was important. About vaccines, and reassuring people that they could go to clinics. So during that time, we were able to communicate, promote, and put into action the values of cooperatives. But when people went back to work, some to two jobs, it became harder to work on the development of the co-ops. None of the co-ops are yet working full-time.

CHIP: It sounds like you're doing all sorts of education within the community, but also education outward, to the city and the larger public, to understand cooperatives. Even the idea of cooperativism, as you saw it in Colombia, is not well known here.

LUZ: That's important. They need to understand our vision and the real meaning of cooperativism that goes beyond economic sustainability. It's not just small business; it's the social and political aspects as well that in the long run will help to strengthen the whole neighborhood and city.

CHIP: How does popular education fit with this work?

LUZ: Popular education is a way of giving everybody the chance to express what they learn through life and feel that that experience matters and can contribute to a larger purpose. A lot of people who study, say, to be a doctor, you need to learn many things through books. But if they are never patients then they don't know what really matters. I think that's what for me popular education means. Everybody has something to contribute to an issue. Everybody has the knowledge to contribute to the solution of whatever problem you're facing.

The only thing that you need is to open the space and listen to their experiences and then together to find out what is the best among all the ideas, knowledge, and experiences. Most people that are part of the co-ops, they have experiences in their own country that they can bring. People are teachers and students at the same time. CCDS opens that space. So people that went to a cooperative school, studied in a

cooperative university—now, you share that with other people (cf. funds of knowledge, Gonzalez et al. 2005) so we all can learn and teach.

CHIP: What meaning does this work have for building a democratic society?

LUZ: One of the principles of cooperativism is democracy, that everyone has a voice in the development of their own goals. It's not just about voting for someone or the bylaws or anything like that. But it is deeper than that—it's having a voice in the creation of a project in which they have ownership. In our lives, many things happen and a lot affects your life, but you don't have any control. Through cooperativism, in a very tiny way, people are speaking out and creating a way of valuing people's ideas, life experiences, knowledge and together benefit from that process.

We're facing gentrification. What are we going to do? Everyone has a voice in that. It is not my idea or hers or his, but about the whole. Even if I don't agree with something that people are making decisions, I'm OK if I feel that most people really want that. The same goes for the minimum wage. The co-ops collectively set a minimum that works for families in East Boston. People then work together to make that possible.

Cooperativism creates a space for people to have a voice and control over their lives. That is empowering for people as they work to build democracy together. In cooperativism we are very aware that what affects one of us affects us all. That is why the voices of the most affected should be at the center so we all can move together and nobody gets behind.

Discussion

In May 2004, Jan Egeland, the United Nations Undersecretary for Humanitarian Affairs, declared that Colombia had become "by far the biggest humanitarian catastrophe of the Western Hemisphere." Warfare among the army, right-wing paramilitaries, cocaine traffickers, and leftist guerrillas displaced 2 million of the 36 million residents as refugees (Canby 2004). Many of those fled to shantytowns, with thousands of people "floating in a sea of sewage and garbage." A few of those people managed to get to the United States, which had been a major contributor to the conflict.

Co-ops are one response to these traumas and continuing oppression. They emphasize individual growth, democratic decision-making, learning,

social justice, community building, and work with dignity. They are good examples of the phenomenon that immigrants are twice as likely to become entrepreneurs as native-born US citizens. They also show how cross-cultural experiences may increase individuals' capabilities to identify promising business ideas (Vandor and Franke 2016). And, of course, the work of Luz and her colleagues is an exemplary version of social entrepreneurship.

This is democracy from the bottom up. John Dewey argues that the moral meaning of democracy is "that the supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contribution they make to the all-around growth of every member of society" (Dewey 1967, 186). This could be the mission statement for CCDS. Among the implications are the following.

Democracy in Every Aspect of Life

Democracy is enacted not only through formal procedures such as voting but also through every aspect of our lives. Questions such as "To what degree does our health-care system or available employment contribute to 'the all-around growth of every member of society'?" become paramount.

Jane Addams reminds us what interconnectedness really means. We are all implicated in social life. Democracy means recognizing those connections and doing something about them: "This is the penalty of a democracy—that we are bound to move forward or retrograde together. None of us can stand aside; our feet are mired in the same soil, and our lungs breathe the same air" (Addams 2002). The penalty is a challenge to move beyond formal procedures in political life as well as in the classroom. The severity of that challenge should make us gasp. But it is also the basis for making a democracy possible.

Full, Ethical Participation

A second implication of Dewey's supreme test is that democratic education should relate to democratic life in all its forms. Although democratic practices within the classroom are important, the goal of critical, socially engaged citizenship is paramount, where "citizen" here means all participants in social life. Full democratic education entails learning about our pluralistic society and how to participate ethically in all that we do.

That idea is expressed well in an essay Addams wrote after the financial panic of 1893, in which she likens the railroad czar George Pullman to King Lear. When we turn away from mutual relationships and ignore our shared

interests, we descend, as Lear did, into madness: "Our thoughts . . . cannot be too much directed from mutual relationships and responsibilities. They will be warped, unless we look all men in the face, as if a community of interests lay between. . . . To touch to vibrating response the noble fibre in each man, to pull these many fibres, fragile, impalpable and constantly breaking, as they are, into one impulse, to develop that mere impulse through its feeble and tentative stages into action, is no easy task, but lateral progress is impossible without it" (Addams 1894).

Addams knew that we had the potential to recognize the "community of interests" among us, but that we needed to work in both formal education and daily life to "develop that mere impulse" into action.

Paulo Freire has been influential in the philosophy of CCDS. He emphasizes that democracy requires continual questioning and problem posing. This is important both for societal development and for individual growth. A passage from Freire summarizes well the educative and social action aspects of the cooperatives: "For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire 2005, 72).

Freire further shows the connection between the project of the cooperatives to address social life and material needs: "It is as transforming and creative beings that humans, in their permanent relations with reality, produce not only material goods—tangible objects—but also social institutions, ideas and concepts. Through their continuing praxis, men and women simultaneously create history and become historical-social beings" (Freire 2005, 101).

Equal Access

A third implication of the supreme test is that there must be equal access to the means and ends of democratic education. The possibilities for full participation in democratic living cannot be fully realized when access to books, education, training, and social participation are limited. Ethics cannot be limited to the individual virtues, such as honesty, courage, or duty, but must encompass social relations as well, what Addams calls "social ethics."

Addams knew that democracy was a hollow ideal without social ethics. It is depressing to realize that the inequities of wealth, the racism, and the corruption of her day are still with us, and in many ways worse. Our social ethics appears piecemeal and ephemeral. At times the "mere impulse"

seems nonexistent. We need to look beyond the daily headlines, to the lives of ordinary people finding ways to work together for the common good. Cooperativism in general and in the specific case of Luz and her colleagues in East Boston shows us one way that this can happen.

Conclusion

The path to cooperativism is not an easy one, with many failed attempts across diverse communities. The very idea of the solidarity economy is inconsistent with unbridled capitalism. Goals such as affordable housing and decent wages are easier to state than to realize. Despite that, the work of Luz and others on cooperatives in East Boston shows a way to progress and to engage in that struggle.

Much of the learning through the cooperatives occurs in the community through a focus on supporting families and work with dignity. Although there is no formal school or school building, there are classes and teaching throughout the process. Whether we view education as a means to promote democracy or democratic practice as a means to promote learning, education is inseparable from the efforts to support work with dignity, health care, housing, and other social needs.

Cooperatives in East Boston come close to meeting Dewey's supreme test. They build on the grounded reality of life, in which securing adequate housing and health care, combating discrimination, finding work with dignity, and countering wealth disparities are ever-present challenges. Educating government agencies and the larger public is as essential as educating residents of the community. These efforts also demonstrate ways that active work in the community can be an indispensable part of general education.

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