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journals.sagepub.com/home/est**Felix Butzlaff** *Institute for Social Change and Sustainability (IGN), Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria*

Abstract

In this article, I address the ways in which debates in liberal, (post)Marxist and post-modernist social theory have remoulded readings of emancipation – and how these reformulations have affected the organisation of emancipatory struggles by and in political parties and social movements. I focus on three conceptual ambiguities that have spurred theoretical disputes and restructured organisational imaginations of emancipation: *who* might struggle for liberation, *to what end* and *in which ways*. In all three respects, understandings of emancipation have become increasingly individualised, contingent and process-oriented – both in theory and in its political-organisational correspondents. As a consequence, effective collective struggles for autonomy may become ever more difficult to organise. While occurring in the name of further liberation, the ongoing reinterpretation of emancipation and its impact on the political organisation of emancipatory struggles might in the end hamper or even undermine the very liberation and autonomy they had aimed to promote.

Keywords

Dialectic of emancipation, individualisation, political parties, social movements

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The dissolution of emancipatory organisation?

The history of emancipation shows a continuous struggle over the term's meanings and implications as a *theoretical concept*, a *core value* of (European) modernity and as a *driver of political and social struggles*. Not only scholars of social theory and philosophy, but almost all social and political movements since the French Revolution have implicitly or explicitly resorted to the concept to claim (albeit very different) imaginations of a better or more just society. Emancipation as a concept connects a critical analysis of present social structures with a normative judgement and the struggle for social change (Coole, 2015). Since Marx and later the Frankfurt School of critical theory, a *critical analysis* of current structures of domination and *practical aims for emancipation* are imagined to go hand in hand (Allen, 2015, p. 513). Emancipation intertwines the history of political thinking with the history of liberation struggles (Salzborn, 2015) and constitutes as much a theoretical and normative concept as a political-organisational mission. Therefore, the questions of *what* and *why* are as important as those of *by whom* and *how*. How the political-organisational operationalisations of emancipation have interrelated with social theory debates on the matter is the question this article seeks to address.

In doing so, I take up a puzzling dialectic ingrained in the term's conceptual development: Scholars have repeatedly pointed to a constant enlargement (Grass & Koselleck, 1994) and pluralisation (Rebughini, 2015) of the term's meaning, which has nurtured fierce academic and political debates about inner tensions and paradoxes of the very concept itself (Allen, 2015). These struggles over its interpretation have direct consequences for the organisation of emancipatory struggles and quests as they lead to widely differing pathways towards emancipation. Demands for emancipation have been a key driver of remarkably diverse collective movements such as working-class, feminist, post-colonial or ecologist mobilisations. They might, as the contributions by Swynge-douw and Lütjen in this Special Issue show, also be intertwined with capitalist and neoliberal versions of domination and individuality (Foucault, 2008) as well as with explicitly right-wing, exclusive, colonial or racist imaginations of freedom and liberation (Allen, 2015; Coole, 2015). Furthermore, as I will argue, prevailing, especially post-foundational, readings of emancipation see a political *organisation* of emancipation altogether highly critical, as any organisation might pose the risk of new forms of hierarchy, domination and heteronomy. Hence, in contrast to large parts of its political and terminological history since the nineteenth century, contemporary notions of emancipation as a political-organisational goal have become increasingly individualised, flexible and self-governmental. In a dialectical turn, however, this re-script of emancipation might hamper or even undermine the political organisation of autonomy and liberation, and thus foreclose emancipatory struggles for large groups within society. In this article, following the work of Rebughini (2015) and Coole (2015), I will shed light on three of emancipation's conceptual ambiguities that have reshaped prevailing imaginations of its political-organisational correspondents (such as social movements and political parties).

Lately, the memoirs by Ernaux (2008), Eribon (2009), Vance (2016) and Louis (2014) have received great attention. Inter alia, all share a narrative of highly individual and

painful processes of emancipation from social places abandoned by once present political organisations. Furthermore, all have in common that the emancipation in focus was unlikely, hard-won against all odds and relied on the individual resources the authors had at hand – but which their fellow men and women did not possess, and which were, therefore, left behind. What is more, all highlight how the absence of collective social and political organisations that once claimed emancipation for the underprivileged might easily lead to a sharp rise in the susceptibility to right-wing populist notions of liberation. Thus, in light of current right-wing movements in many countries claiming liberation and democratisation; of Anti-Mask-Protests framing resistance against public measures taken during the Covid-19 pandemic as an act of emancipation; of contemporary neo-liberal definitions of autonomy, authenticity and freedom as consumer choice, it is imperative to better understand how political-organisational imaginations of emancipation have been affected by reformulations and contested framings of the concept. As expectations for social change and transformation have been engraved into the term's foundations since the Enlightenment, scrutinising possible impairments of its organisational correspondents may be crucial for two reasons: firstly, to understand how an organisational dialectic of emancipation might undermine its own goals. And secondly, to scrutinise what is left of the once prominent critical as well as transformative weight of emancipation as a driver of struggles for a better life.

My starting point is the observation of three conceptual ambiguities in the readings and understandings of emancipation since the early nineteenth century that have been repeatedly stressed in debates over the term's understanding (Coole, 2015; Rebughini, 2015). They have restructured organisational imaginations of emancipation as they address *who*, *to what end* and *in which way* might struggle for liberation: (a) Is emancipation achieved or granted (*who?*)? (b) Can there be a utopia of an emancipated society (*to what end?*)? and (c) Can emancipation be achieved as a collective or as an individual (*in which way?*)? These three conceptual ambiguities have neither developed unidirectionally, nor in harmony, but have shown wave-like curves, sometimes reversing their direction, sometimes taking turns. Using them as analytical lenses, I emphasise that contemporary political parties and social movements have embraced reframings of emancipation in more and more individualised and process-oriented manners which have, as I argue, rendered the political organisation of emancipatory claims ever more difficult.

The first conceptual ambiguity regards the difference between understanding emancipation as granted by someone else or as an act of active self-liberation. Ever since the birth of the concept of *emancipatio* in the Roman Empire (Grass & Koselleck, 1994), and Kant's classical perspective of the exit of the human being from its 'self-incurred immaturity' (Kant, 1970 [1784], p. 54), the question of whether emancipation, understood as liberation, autonomy and freedom from subjection (Rebughini, 2015) might be only achieved through the emancipatory actor him/herself, or whether it can be top-down organised and granted (Coole, 2015), has fuelled controversies which have reshaped the organisational imaginations of emancipation.

The second conceptual ambiguity is rooted in the question of whether there should be a positive goal of an emancipated society or whether its progress must primarily consist of getting rid of restrictions to freedom and autonomy. Should we formulate a *positive*

vision of a better future or should we stick to a *negativistic* analysis of the social forces of heteronomy? On the one hand, debating what an emancipated future society might look like has been a pivotal property of emancipatory movements, from early Marxists until the New Social Movements. Others, such as Foucault, have strongly objected and have placed a foundationalist interpretation of emancipatory goals at the core of new forms of oppression (Brown, 2005; Foucault, 2008).

The third conceptual ambiguity then arises from the question of whether we emancipate as individuals or whether we need the shelter of an emancipatory collective. Many social movements for a long time understood emancipation as a collective struggle in which the excluded, underprivileged and dominated joined forces in order to collectively claim liberation. However, from the beginning of emancipatory struggles they have *also* been coined as individual demands for an autonomous life. In this view, any social collective might be restricting and possibly authoritarian. Today, theories of individualisation (Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994) have emphasised that the idea of a tight-knit community longing for liberation is ever less to be found, especially, as this article seeks to underline, in political parties and social movements.

In the following, I will scrutinise historical and contemporary liberal, (post)Marxist, and postmodern takes on the three ambiguities and how these have interrelated with different forms of social mobilisations since the nineteenth century (the second section). I will highlight that, although not unequivocally or unidirectional, individualised, flexible, plural and process-oriented imaginations of emancipation have become predominant, whereas collective, top-down inspired and goal-oriented notions have come under attack. Starting out from this review, I will then scrutinise how the political-organisational ideas of political parties (the third section) as well as social movements (the fourth section) as the corresponding organisational shells of emancipatory struggles have deeply embraced the reframings of the term's conceptual ambiguities. These developments themselves are the results of successful emancipatory struggles (targeting the fact that institutions, collectives and emancipatory goals might result in new and indirect heteronomies). However, as I argue, in a dialectical turn they might *also* result in organisations falling short of their emancipatory promises as they atomise individual struggles and make the organisation of effective and powerful social counterforces ever more unlikely. That reframings of emancipation render the organisation of emancipatory struggles – and hence: emancipation – ever more challenging is the dialectic this article seeks to address. The fifth section then presents a conclusion of contemporary dilemmas of emancipation.

Conceptual ambiguities and contested framings

Receiving emancipation or emancipating oneself?

The first of emancipation's conceptual ambiguities to set the stage for changing organisational imaginations is one of agency and focuses on the difference between *receiving* emancipation and emancipating *oneself*. At the core, it raises the question of who shall be considered responsible for liberation and emancipation. The traditional understanding of the term in Roman law pointed at the family father granting independence to his son

(who had *no* universal right to claim it). The liberation from a legal bondage set him free from *being* owned and into a *self-owned* existence (Coole, 2015, p. 532). Later, European Enlightenment understandings broadened this notion of liberation from ownership to a liberation from dependence or a lack of rights or recognition (Grass & Koselleck, 1994). It was used more and more reflexively and increasingly included a *right* to self-emancipate. Instead of passively *becoming emancipated*, Enlightenment claimed the right to demand liberation actively and an *emancipatory agency* for those seeking self-determination. Even more so, for Kant, *not* achieving emancipatory goals was the inevitable consequence of 'self-incurred immaturity' (Kant, 1970 [1784], p. 54). Hence, for Kant every man (women were not to be granted agency by then) had the *duty* to think for himself (Coole, 2015) and later act as a public multiplier for that matter. Taking up this notion of individual autonomy, Koselleck points to the examples of early nineteenth century French bourgeois who claimed the right to self-liberate from the path ordered by their families (Grass & Koselleck, 1994).

Socialist and Marxist organisations of the decades that followed embraced Enlightenment ideas of human reason and self-liberation but altered its characteristics of individual and self-reflexive agency. For them, granting emancipation through an organisational body and social structure was implied by the experience of exclusion and social, political and economic weakness (Sassoon, 2010). Consequently, organisations and institutions should take the place of individual self-liberation and help to facilitate emancipatory awareness, resources and self-consciousness. Especially the fast growing socialist (as well as later the communist) milieu networks of pre-WWI Europe and the 1920s have symbolised this perspective of facilitating and granting a coordinated form of liberation (Lösche & Walter, 1989), most prominently maybe in the case of *Red Vienna* and its numerous institutions aiming at the (self-)development of the underprivileged. Central European welfare states after WWII then inherited this notion. As for big parts of the population necessary resources for emancipation were lacking, autonomy, freedom and self-development had to be granted and facilitated top-down.

However, from the 1960s onwards, partly already much earlier, the critique of this patriarchic understanding of emancipation was thriving. Since Robert Michels' attack on social democratic party organisations as fossilised bureaucracies that had abandoned any aspiration for social transformation, welfare states and big party or movement organisations have increasingly been viewed with suspicion as organisations that might, contrary to their initial purpose, easily develop into new orthodoxies and heteronomy (Michels, 2016). This critique of institutions had also been embedded in Kant's and later Foucault's takes on emancipation (Allen, 2015). Both understood the agency of the individual as connected to a critique of institutions that might formally grant freedom but indirectly subject individuals into new and sometimes voluntary forms of obedience (Coole, 2015). From this point of view, welfare states, party and movement organisations were top-down imposing external ideas of what 'real' liberation would comprise, thwarting the idea of an emancipatory autonomy and self-dependency.

This extends to a scepticism regarding institutions such as the state to play a role in laying the grounds for the emancipation of its citizens. And it connects well with the general doubts liberal ideas have always voiced about institutions and the state. But not only liberal thought, also the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s had

considered the state and its institutions (such as schools, welfare and health systems) as instruments of control that would not so much contribute to an emancipated society but, quite the contrary, might obstruct struggles for liberation (Blühdorn, 2009; Reichardt, 2014). In connection to this, as Rebughini (2015) emphasises, emancipatory understandings have increasingly shifted from a process focusing on an *outside* free from heteronomy (autonomy) to a process focusing on an *inside* true to oneself's goals and destiny (authenticity) (see Blühdorn in this Special Issue). Emancipation, this is the bottom line, has grown more and more self-reflexive and has turned against organisational ideas that had formed in order to grant autonomy and freedom for a large number of people that might not be able to organise it independently.

However, this development curve of emancipatory understandings has been partly deflected. In light of a contemporary modernity that is increasingly perceived as confusing and threatening, the success of right-wing populist movements in Europe and North America (and beyond) has shown that for many people the promise of a granted and top-down facilitated emancipation and liberation is still highly attractive (Blühdorn & Butzlaff, 2019). The right-wing populist narrative of liberation holds the notion of modern individuality upright but emphasises the disburdening and relieving character of top-down offers of emancipation (see Lütjen as well as Swyngedouw in this Special Issue). Maybe this perspective is best summed up in the 2020 election promise of Donald Trump's daughter-in-law, Kimberley Guilfoyle: 'He (Donald Trump) *emancipates you and lifts you up* to live your American dream' (Guilfoyle, 2020, emphasis added by the author). This is not to say that right-wing populists are not highly critical of institutions (see Lütjen in this Special Issue, see also Lütjen (2020)). They do not revert to past ideals of the institutionalised organisation of emancipation. But instead of individualising ideas of autonomy and freedom, they have sensed how attractive and important the top-down facilitation of emancipation is to the many people that do not feel prepared or able to take advantage of the promises of modern consumer societies (Blühdorn & Butzlaff, 2019).

Thus, the question of emancipatory responsibility and agency continues to create tensions. The constant conflict between self-empowerment on the one hand and taking care of the socially weak on the other, which is an ongoing discussion among political theorists, parties and practitioners alike, bears witness of these different perspectives. However, the organisational perspectives of movements and parties have to a high degree internalised Kant's and Foucault's critique of institutions (see the third and fourth sections).

Struggles against domination or struggles for liberation?

The second of emancipation's conceptual ambiguities unfolds between the demands to emancipate oneself from an oppression or a dependency, on the one hand, and the claims to create a future and emancipated lifeworld, on the other. While the former emphasises to grow *out* of a social oppression, the latter highlights to grow *into* a new and future one. Emancipation, therefore, might entail a defensive character and/or an utopian element (Benhabib, 1986). Yet, both characters do not necessarily go hand in hand. As Allen has highlighted (2015), there is a tension between an analytical-descriptive and an

anticipatory-utopian character of emancipation – both being intertwined, but inherently creating contradictions (Brown, 2005).

Workers, women and Jews of the European nineteenth century (and well into the twentieth) had vividly debated and quarrelled over future utopias of an emancipated society (Slezkine, 2006). For instance, August Bebel's essay on 'Woman and Socialism' ('Die Frau und der Sozialismus') from 1879 had seen its 50th edition already in 1909 and was the most read Marxist book before 1914. In it, he assured the suffering working classes of a better and more just future and laid out concretely what this would look like (Bebel, 1910). To endure the hardship of social, political and economic discrimination and to organise against it, colourful and tangible goals that grounded in collective beliefs proved key. And whoever raised concerns that debating long-term goals might distract from the daily struggles, like the social democrat Eduard Bernstein famously did, suggesting to concentrate on a step by step process, was fiercely attacked and threatened with excommunication (Strohschneider, 2019). The struggles over programs laying out the future life always played a key role in the self-understanding of socialist struggles for liberation (Walter & Marg, 2013).

Later, especially Foucault criticised the necessity of utopian horizons from a post-structuralist perspective. He described emancipation as a process of liberation that was never-ending, as any goal of a free, just and simply better society would inevitably lead to a new hegemony of unquestionable truths that would turn into oppression and subjugation. Much more than the imagination of what a better or more just life would look like, for Foucault emancipation was found in an immanent and continuous analysis of current structures of power (Rebughini, 2015). Emancipation, in this perspective, is necessarily individual and context dependent. As Foucault and later Judith Butler have emphasised, there is no outside to power (Butler, 1995; Foucault, 1997) – which means, there is no subject free of power, hence, no possibility for *genuine* emancipation (Allen, 2015, p. 515). From this point of view, all utopias of a free and just society pretend a world beyond power relations, yet inevitably create new dominations and oppressions. Thus, the normative foundations of emancipation must remain dissolved and contingent (see Blühdorn in this Special Issue). There cannot be a definite goal or end point of *being emancipated*.

From the beginning, Foucault's perspective had been deemed as impeding social transformations. Habermas and feminist critiques (such as famously Simone de Beauvoir) criticised his conceptualisation and in turn emphasised the importance of the process of searching for a collectively accepted emancipatory ideal (Kirkpatrick, 2020). In developing his theory of communicative action, Habermas defined the possibility to speak up and debate emancipatory ends as part of an emancipatory process itself (Habermas, 1984, 1988). In any public discourse, understandings of social liberation would have to be justified and mutually agreed upon. In contrast to Foucault, to whom communication was the seed of domination and power, for Habermas communication (and thus agreeing on commonly shared normative foundations and goals) was at the very core of emancipation (Rebughini, 2015).

This debate between, on the one hand, understanding emancipation as a contingent, immanent and highly individual process of liberation that focuses on an ongoing dissolution of foundations and, on the other hand, understanding emancipation as the

struggle for a better, just or more ethical society has been ongoing (Basaure, 2011; Boltanski, 2013; Honneth, 2004).

As more and more social groups and movements sought recognition and liberation since the 1950s and 1960s (women, people of different races or of colour, sexual identities, with handicaps, etc.), emancipatory imaginations pluralised. A definitive goal of what an emancipated life could or should look like seemed to have become impossible to formulate. This has led not only to theoretical accounts of the increasingly contingent and context-dependent character of emancipation but also to a change in the claims and organisational structures of social movements and political parties. Struggles for emancipation have become plural, individual as well as ‘more local and more specific’ (Rebughini, 2015, p. 281). Furthermore, the post-foundationalist understanding of emancipation not as a concrete social utopia but instead as a transformation of domination into ‘mobile, reversible, and unstable relations of power that are also practices of freedom’ (Allen, 2015, p. 519) connects very well to capitalist and neoliberal interpretations of liberation on the one hand and with sociological theories of individualisation on the other (see the next conceptual ambiguity). In a neoliberal twist of Kant, emancipation and liberation from domination were increasingly internalised as an ongoing duty of each individual in order to realise their full potential. The Foucauldian critique of institutionalised and organised visions of a better and just future as being condescending and potentially oppressive were more and more embraced (Sennett, 1999). Especially the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s with their focus on the development of a true and authentic self have advanced these emancipatory notions (Blühdorn, 2009, 2013; Reichardt, 2014).

But the loss of a common perspective has not only led to a pluralisation of emancipatory understandings but also to a disillusionment and a ‘long crisis of the grand modern narrative of emancipation’ (Rebughini, 2015, p. 281). Which goals to strive for, which struggles to make and which fights to fight – all this is increasingly left to the individual to decide upon as the contemporary take on emancipation primarily involves the understanding of *not* being subjected to someone else’s notions of self-liberation (Bauman, 2012; Beck, 1992). It might, however, as the next section will discuss, imply not only an individualised process of self-government but also an atomisation that makes collective struggles for a socially more just society (which Foucault would have perceived as the nucleus for new domination, anyway) all the more difficult (Brown, 2005).

Emancipation, understood this way, becomes a *process of liberation*, but in light of an ongoing pluralisation of emancipatory struggles, it is increasingly difficult to narrow down possible scenarios of emancipatory goals (Rebughini, 2015). In contrast to past social mobilisations, movements are somewhat deprived of the mobilising potential of concrete emancipatory goals and visions. Therefore, organising powerful counterforces in society that might object existing structures of domination and heteronomy is left to the individual and to the resources it has at hand.

Individualised or collective struggles?

Picking up these debates, a third conceptual ambiguity arises between understanding emancipation as an individual undertaking and emancipation as a collective struggle.

Whereas it was clearly the son as an individual in the Roman law, it took a long time until emancipation's meaning was expanded to social groups, classes, peoples and nations. Since the French revolution, individual and collective takes on *who* might emancipate him/herself have shifted notably. Especially understandings of how to *organise* emancipation politically and how to facilitate emancipatory opportunities have been continuously changing with the role attributed to the individual and the collective. Again, the theoretical dispute around this ambiguity can be traced back to the debate between Foucault, on the one hand (and later Boltanski, focusing on the contingent and highly individualised character of emancipation), and Habermas, on the other (and later Honneth, focusing on the socially integrated character of emancipatory struggles as well as their normative foundation, see the second conceptual ambiguity).

The original meaning of the term implied a highly individualised liberation from ownership. Later on, early nineteenth century French bourgeois had interpreted the term also as an individualised opportunity (Grass & Koselleck, 1994). Reframing these notions, especially the emerging workers' movements (together with the first women's movements), had understood the liberation of the underprivileged as a task that demanded embedding in a strong and firm social collective. Only then could the analysis of social structures of domination be transferred into a political practice of liberation (Walter & Marg, 2013). In doing so, they firmly rejected bourgeois understandings of autonomy and freedom. A liberation of the individual, in their view, required the power of the collective to break up with established power structures. Understanding emancipation as a collective task promised clear political-organisational and strategic advantages.

After WWII, the idea of a collective struggle for emancipation has been picked up and further developed by feminist movements as well as by post-colonial liberation movements around the globe. As with the early Marxists several decades before, post-colonial and feminist takes on a collective framing of emancipation not only demanded liberation but also departed from the classical understandings of European Modernity and Enlightenment as fuelled by 'renaissance, reformation, scientific revolution, rationality, secularism and capitalism' (Rebughini, 2015, p. 274), which claimed universal liberation and autonomy, yet denied it to women and ethnically diverse citizens. Pulling both strings together, a reformulated collective idea of emancipation and a critique of the colonialist notion of previous understandings have contributed to the deconstruction of the 'European grand narrative of emancipation'. With regard to emancipatory mobilisations and the tension between an individualistic and authenticity-focused notion of emancipation, on the one hand, and a collective- and social group-based understanding, on the other, post-colonial liberation struggles have emphasised a certain *re-collectivisation* of emancipation, as it was often a struggle of an oppressed *people* longing for liberation (Fanon, 1963). Yet, collective struggles did not arise miraculously but relied on the framing work constructing the collective – they were dependent on the practical work of mobilisation.

Scholars standing in a Marxist tradition strongly criticised individualistic takes on emancipation and the idea of emancipation as 'authenticity' (Adorno, 2007). To Adorno, for example, individualistic notions of freedom and liberation merely reflected the 'falseness of bourgeois society, with its reference to the secular self-sufficiency of rational individuals' (cited after Rebughini, 2015, p. 275). In his work on the importance

of communicative action, Habermas has emphasised that even personal and individual emancipation would entail a mutual agreement and a public discourse about means and ends (Habermas, 1984, 1988). From this perspective, emancipation cannot be limited to an individual seeking liberation and authenticity but should be understood as a collective social and at times even institutional undertaking to create the conditions for a more free and just society and as a collective undertaking to agree on normative grounds.

In contrast, since the 1970s, two intertwined developments have increasingly put such a collective understanding under pressure. One is the frame of neoliberal economic thinking that has become the dominant 'new social logic' (Rebughini, 2015, p. 278, see also Swyngedouw in this Special Issue). The other is the ongoing process of individualisation that has been described in sociological theory (Bauman, 2012; Beck, 1992). Picking up the diagnoses of individualisation in Western societies, scholars of postmodernisation (with Foucault being the most prominent) had defined emancipation as an *individual-based process* (see previous section), and as a critical, yet *individual thought* (Foucault, 2011): 'individual and collective emancipation cannot be but self-founded' (Rebughini, 2015, p. 276). To Foucault, as noted before, the pursuit of a practice of liberation would be a purely individual and context-related undertaking as every attempt to formulate collective grounds would inevitably lead to new forms of orthodoxy and hegemony, a mere façade of progressive freedom (Foucault, 1997).

Social theories of individualisation were inspired by the context of the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s that had ennobled processes of individualisation as a higher degree of self-determination (Blühdorn, 2009; Reichardt, 2014). Beck (1992) and Bauman (2012), among others, have emphasised how neoliberal economic thinking and processes of individualisation in Western societies have led to most problems being perceived as individual settings that consequentially could only be addressed individually. Furthermore, that social groups, collectives and families were viewed rather as obstacles to than as enablers of freedom, justice and emancipation. Sennett, in his work on capitalism and character, has underlined how this has affected ideals of success and a desirable life (Sennett, 1999). Rather than addressing structural social issues, seeking the shelter of a social collective or imagining the potential of collective counterpowers, he has developed how the ideal of liberation has increasingly shifted towards purely individual struggles and achievements. These approaches by Sennett, Beck, Bauman and others have shown that economic categories have become primary measurements for a desirable good life and self-determination. Here, capitalism and individualistic notions of emancipation might easily go hand in hand (Allen, 2015; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). In a neoliberal perspective, it is not changing society for the better that can and should be the aim of emancipatory struggles but in turn the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number' (Rebughini, 2015, p. 275) – and happiness equals individual self-determination and material well-being. In this view, collective understandings and organisations of emancipatory struggles appear counterproductive. As they directly or indirectly subordinate the individual to the strategic decisions and the emancipatory ideals of others (the collective), even collective organisations focusing on *emancipation* are suspected as the nuclei of reaction. As I will show in the next sections, these notions have had serious consequences for the organisation of emancipatory struggles.

Lately, there has been increasing attention for the problematic effects of such individualised understandings of emancipation (Rebughini, 2015). The consequences of persistent social, political and economic inequalities as well as the controversial relationship between the *liberation from social control* (by groups, families, milieus or institutions) and the *loss of support* from these very same entities have been emphasised for the individual but also for social collectives and institutions such as liberal democracies. As Fraser has stressed, in light of soaring inequalities produced by decades of neoliberalisation, the Foucauldian notion of emancipation as a purely individual, immanent and contingent process of self-development may seem naïve. In turn, she notes, a collective and institutionalised (maybe even state-centred) understanding of emancipation may appear necessary (Fraser, 2003).

Beyond social theory, a cultural neoliberalism and its take on emancipation has also been increasingly criticised by contemporary social movements and emancipatory struggles such as the Arab Spring movements, the Occupy and square movements (Varvarousis et al., 2020), the alter-globalisation movements and the Fridays for Future mobilisations (Wahlström et al., 2019). They have claimed a liberation from economic and social constraints but have sought to (inter alia) reformulate the ideal of emancipation as a critique of neoliberalism and a struggle for social justice. As it appears, neoliberalisation and individualised notions of emancipation have not led to the disappearance of collective struggles in the new millennium (Pickard, 2019; Rebughini, 2010). Nevertheless, the impracticality to formulate concrete and collective utopias for emancipation and the organisational consequences have proven a political and strategic liability they could (or can) hardly overcome (Rohgalf, 2013).

Thus, going back to the three conceptual ambiguities of emancipation that form the analytical lenses of this article, over the last decades social theory debates on emancipation have continuously shifted its meaning towards *more reflexive, self-centred, process-oriented* and *individualised* notions. I am now turning to political parties and social movements to scrutinise how their organisational imaginations of emancipation have embraced these shifts.

Emancipation and political parties

Political parties and social movements might, beyond other roles and characteristics they are attributed in political systems, be considered as an institutionalised link between an anticipatory-utopian vision and the concrete practice of emancipation (Rebughini, 2010). In organising, aggregating and voicing claims for liberation, democratisation and autonomy, they fulfil the double task of debating visions of emancipation, on the one hand, as well as providing emancipatory stirrups to citizens and channelling their demands into the sphere of the political system, on the other. Thus, in striving for social change, together with social movements (see next section) political parties might be understood as emancipation's political-organisational correspondents. For this, the roles that parties attribute to their members and sympathisers as those that are supposedly emancipating or to-be-emancipated are key factors.

As adaptive organisations, how parties organise reflects how they imagine to best address emancipatory demands. In party research, a great number of party typologies has

been suggested to differentiate various forms of linking social to organisational change (Gerbaudo, 2019b). Beyond the considerable organisational differentiations between party families and party systems that have been widely researched (Poguntke et al., 2016), many scholars have diagnosed a similar trend of political parties' organisational development. Though it has been suggested that political participation of citizens has become more and more diversified (van Deth, 2014), many accounts of organisational and programmatic changes of political parties reveal considerable common ground, if not an 'isomorphism' (Faucher, 2015, p. 415). For the question of how shifting notions of emancipation are reflected in movement and party organisations, this diagnosis of an underlying trend influencing organisational shifts and adaptations in the same *directions* (not end points!) is well worth exploring. Still, one has to be cautious not to naïvely assume all parties as converging into one single organisational ideal, which would mean ignoring all due differentiations between parties or party systems (Cross & Pilet, 2014).

Using emancipation's conceptual ambiguities as analytical lenses, the shifting perspective of political parties on member participation might be summarised as increasingly *contingent* and *individualised*. In this, political parties have internalised the debates that have reframed emancipation as a political task and have turned to more *self-centred*, *process-oriented* and *pluralised* ways to organise their members' and sympathisers' emancipatory demands. Mirroring the findings of the previous section, accounts of party change have shown that since the 1980s evolving forms and understandings of participation indicate (a) increasing attention to the members (Bale et al., 2020); (b) a more contingent, less normative and less foundational approach to programmatic claims (Butzlaff, 2019); and (c) a changing (and weakening) relationship between the individual member and the institutionalised collective (Pennings & Hazan, 2001).

As regards the first conceptual ambiguity, the diagnoses of increasing demands for self-empowerment and the critique of institutions lie at the core of recently emerging party models, such as *movement parties* (Della Porta et al., 2017), *connective parties* (Bennett et al., 2018), *digital parties* (Gerbaudo, 2019a), *platform parties* (Gerbaudo, 2019b) or *digital movement parties* (Deseriis, 2020). These new conceptualisations suggest that parties increasingly promise 'directness, disintermediation, interactivity, adaptability and instantaneous responsiveness' (Gerbaudo, 2019b, p. 188). All highlight a remoulding of the principle of a political party in Western liberal democracies based on the democratisation and opening up of party organisations (Bille, 2001; Scarrow et al., 2000).

Here, especially bottom-up notions of political participation are prevailing. Portraying a contemporary participatory *Zeitgeist*, Gauja describes a shift from participation perceived as a duty towards 'more engaged and autonomous form(s) of political participation' (Gauja, 2017, p. 81) which cater to self-reflexive and inward-focused participatory motivations. Handing over more decision-power to the members so as to let them decide for themselves has become the crucial legitimisation figure of organisational change. These findings might not be restricted to the organisational reality of political parties, but to the realm of party researchers, too. As Wolkenstein (2019) has emphasised, in political theory and party research, too, the notion of formalised and institutionalised participation as the base of political organisation has been increasingly

considered normatively inferior to non-institutionalised, direct, spontaneous and more radical forms of political action.

Concerning the second conceptual ambiguity and the post-modernist scepticism of normative foundations, concrete goals and social utopias, programmatic debates in political parties have become more open and ideologically less binding (Butzlaff, 2019). Reflecting the diagnosis of a more immanent and process-oriented understanding of emancipation, increasingly programmatic decisions are justified with reference to citizens' preferences as opposed to ideological coherence. Less than ever, parties seek to become an ideological authority and have instead retreated to notions of democracy, emancipation and liberation that focus on the members', sympathisers' and voters' programmatic expectations and demands. Rather than programmatically prescribing a better society, parties increasingly advocate the undistorted replay of external notions of liberation and emancipation (i.e. the supporters' or the voters') as democratically superior and legitimisation-inducing.

As to the third conceptual ambiguity, by individualising affiliation, and by directly engaging members and supporters, party reforms have replaced forms of social collectivisations that had grouped members into opinion-forming processes. In tailoring channels of communication, campaigns, candidate and leadership selection to the individual (Gibson, 2015), parties have sought to overcome notions of past and sometimes patronising traditions and collective institutions (Gauja, 2014). This includes blurring the lines between a binding member commitment and a non-binding supporter affiliation, as well as enabling single issue or campaign participation instead of having to previously accept the full catalogue of party values and programme (Butzlaff et al., 2011; Scarrow, 2014). Membership and participation do not involve the notion of a long-term commitment anymore but are rather flexible 'opportunities for ad hoc engagement' (Gauja, 2017, p. 84). In digitised and individualised party organisations, people do not have to actually meet to participate, but pursue their interests or demands through direct and individual interaction with the party elites and through an 'atomistic approach to participation' (Faucher, 2015). Moving away from participation being perceived as a moral duty of citizens (Almond & Verba, 1963), participation patterns increasingly reflect individualistic understandings of the citizen as a consumer of politics and public service. Since the 1980s, the 'citizen-consumer' (Faucher, 2015, p. 414) has become a synonym for liberalisation and democratisation. This way, the individual member and not the intermediary group has become the focus of social change and emancipatory struggles in society at large (Haenfler et al., 2012) as well as in party reforms (Faucher, 2015). When taking into account that many of the party organisations were historically rooting in social *collectives* and that past conceptualisations of the formation of party systems have always highlighted the importance of collective social milieus, this is quite a change (as a classical example see Lipset & Rokkan, 1967).

Surely, this atomisation of membership is not unequivocally the case: deliberations, regional conferences and participatory processes are also catering to the demand for a *collective* party culture (Butzlaff et al., 2011; Faucher, 2015). Through reform processes, political parties might demonstrate an interest about the lifeworld of their sympathisers and voters, on the one hand, and offer concrete assistance with daily life problems and challenges, on the other (Butzlaff et al., 2011). Reforms are often focusing on the figure

of the *Kümmerer/Caretaker* that parties want to embody (Speck & Ivanova-Chessex, 2013). This would mean to re-establish connections and relationships with social groups that had been lost and to mimic a collective identity as well as a top-down notion of providing emancipatory opportunities political parties once were rooted in (Butzlaff et al., 2011; Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). Still, most observers agree that new procedures often remain limited to a consulting role of members and ‘listening’ exercises – which then again raises doubts about the character of party-based emancipation (Faucher, 2015; Katz, 2001).

Thus, the reformulations of emancipation that have been embraced by party organisations result in an intricate dialectic: organisational changes in the name of liberation and autonomy might undermine their very own intentions if they atomise party members or strip collective organisations of their collective character (Ignazi, 2018). If individualised and contingent notions of liberation make the promise of emancipation ever more dependent on the resources the individual has at hand (or not), these reframings of the concept might greatly reduce the potential of political parties to empower the individual citizen.

Furthermore, it has been emphasised that emancipatory and democratic reforms are often triggered by inner-party power struggles (Gauja, 2017; Harmel & Janda, 1994) and party elites seeking control over the party activists. This has been called the ‘paradox of the democratisation of candidate selection’ (Pennings & Hazan, 2001: 271) which might be a paradox of opening up in general: that democratisation might lead to further centralisation of parties (Cross & Pilet, 2014). With the promise of direct influence and undistorted participatory channels, the traditional local and regional functionaries, collective factions, pressure-groups and so on are being pushed aside (Faucher, 2015) from above *and* below. Party elites *and* party members (this is of importance) are often using notions of democratisation and liberation to cater to demands for individualised participation, on the one hand – and to include members into a democratically disguised control by the party elite, on the other (Ignazi, 2018). Yet by taking up Foucauldian reservations regarding emancipatory utopias and collective notions of liberation, and by defining themselves ‘in terms of individual citizens rather than group interests’ (Gauja, 2014, p. 90), the ability to address collective grievances in societies as well as to organise collective action for those groups that are otherwise overheard is greatly reduced (Scarow, 1999). This way, modernising, de-traditionalising and individualising the organisation of emancipation might merely stage the empowerment it is said to promote. In contrast, it might create a dialectic of emancipation and an ‘elite strategy to defang the base’ (Katz, 2001, p. 293).

Emancipation and social movements

Looking at less institutionalised links between emancipatory utopias and practices of liberation, in the sphere of social movements and civil society activism the picture appears less coherent and more confusing. There is an unmanageable variety of activism that has fuelled social movement studies and participation research. Still, here too, it is possible to distinguish overarching trends regarding the realisation and organisation of emancipatory demands and practices. And as with political parties, I argue that through

the analytical lens of the three conceptual ambiguities it seems that contemporary repertoires of activism and social movements have deeply embraced postfoundationalist readings of emancipation and have gradually incorporated more *self-centred*, *process-oriented* and *individualised* understandings of emancipation. Using the three conceptual ambiguities as entry points, it becomes visible how the individualised experience of members, as well as contingent, experimental and non-utopian notions of emancipation have transferred into activist repertoires.

Regarding the first conceptual ambiguity and demands for autonomy, self-determination and emancipatory agency, there appears to be an increasing importance of the experience of directness, authenticity, locality and immediateness in social movement activism. Many emerging forms of movements have been investigated that emphasise the local and direct character of contemporary activism. *Direct social action* (Bosi & Zamponi, 2020) as well as a *new localism* or *new materialism* (Deflorian, 2020) claim to address the most pressing of today's multiple crises and pick up contemporary participatory demands (Mocca, 2020). Instead of delegating the task of liberation struggles and to integrate into large social movement organisations, the idea of doing things *yourself* and to genuinely emancipate bottom-up and individually stands at the core here. Be it because of the experience of austerity and crisis (Bosi & Zamponi, 2020), because of an increasing mistrust in all forms of national or even supranational forms of organisation and bureaucracy (Mocca, 2020), or because the individual member focuses on a flexible and personal participatory motivation (Deflorian, 2020), only a local and unmediated struggle for emancipatory perspectives is considered valuable. In fact, there is evidence suggesting that social change at large might not even be the goal anymore, but that it is the private, local and small-scale surroundings or even individual identity needs that should be addressed through activism and participation (Butzlaff & Deflorian, 2021).

As to the second conceptual ambiguity, and in connection with this new localism, in the last years, there has been an increasing attention to forms of *prefigurative politics* which highlights the need for self-experience and emancipatory struggles that are not guided by pre-defined goals but arenas for symbolic experimentation and alternative in the Foucauldian sense (Swain, 2017; Yates, 2015). The expression of a possible alternative and the demonstration of a moral example that is *not* based on a normative utopia but on the experimentation towards a different society while the old is still in place. Differing from the idea of vanguardist activism knowing the way, prefigurative movements have increasingly embraced the notion of *not* prescribing concrete goals but to understand experimentation and personal development as a path towards a non-heteronomous emancipation (Swain, 2017). Liberation goals are increasingly perceived as contingent, personal and fluid in order not to impose them on members and to form broad, inclusive coalitions (Pickard 2019, p. 392). Furthermore, not only normative utopias but also pathways towards predefined goals are increasingly perceived as hardly viable in a complex and disconcerting world. Rather than discussing long-term goals and strategies, movements therefore form goals along the way in extensive deliberative and democratic processes that often consume much of the participants' energy (Polletta, 2002). In that, prefigurative politics embody the Foucauldian notion of contingency and reluctance of utopian horizons.

Although not a theorist of social movements, Foucault has explicitly addressed how in activism emancipation could be put into practice – and lately his take has resonated strongly among movement organisations. He advocated so-called *Heterotopias* not as imagined, unreal aims, but as *real spaces*, ‘counter sites’ (Foucault, 1986) that contest and reject, yet represent the society they are part of. Rebutting the idea of ideal utopias, Foucault envisaged a kind of emancipatory prefigurative politics to visibly contest and challenge structures of power and oppression as well as to create experimental real spaces where these powers are partly or temporarily repealed. The process of emancipation in the Foucauldian perspective should lead to concrete and inspiring examples of emancipatory struggles, not to these struggles debating about what freedom might look like. Indeed, these Foucauldian understandings of emancipation lie at the core of many of the emerging and prevailing forms of contemporary social movement activism.

Concerning the third conceptual ambiguity and individualised notions of emancipation, several contemporary forms of movement organisation have somewhat remoulded the collective nature of activism and have deeply embraced the critique and scepticism towards the collective as the nucleus for social change. *Lifestyle movements* have been described as focused on the personal and individual lifestyle of participants (Haenfler et al., 2012). Here, the individual lifestyle and the personal identity work done by the members become the pathways for social change and liberation. Consequently, and as with the above-mentioned forms of direct social action and prefigurative politics, organisational structures of lifestyle movements are diffuse and seemingly non-hierarchical in that they promote emancipation by means of private daily life and identities. With it comes a much less binding and episodic commitment of participants. Also, even the large-scale mobilisations of Fridays for Future in 2019 that have appeared to signal a re-emergence of collective action have emphasised the importance of *individual* lifestyles as drivers for social change (Wahlström et al., 2019). Pickard (2019, p. 385) has emphasised that contemporary movements and the participation patterns of young generations show *personalised* rather than individualistic demands to be engaged, and that this should not be mistaken for being self-serving as participation still aimed at the common good. Nevertheless, also in Pickard’s extensive inventory of present-day participation of young people, traditional notions of the collective as carriers of emancipatory demands have been replaced by new understandings of the *individual* and *personal* as drivers of self-actualisation and expression. Pickard suggests the concept of *DIO-politics* (*Do-it-ourselves*) as a non-institutional form of engagement that is an inclusive and collective way of organising and mobilising for a common good, but in a rather ‘buffet’ and ‘à la carte’ manner, that enables the individual to choose (Pickard 2019, p. 392). The *collective* in collective action has been rendered increasingly flexible, loose and rather non-binding.

Furthermore, in their account of how *digitalisation* alters social mobilisations, Bennet and Segerberg (2012) have suggested that participation through and with digital media has become so much more flexible and personalised that the traditional movement goal of establishing collective identities might have become obsolete. Digitally organised mobilisations, such as the Occupy or Indignados movements, do not rely on a symbolically constructed ‘we’ anymore but instead allow each participant to find and reproduce individual motivations for emancipation. This reading would very much resonate with

the above-mentioned postmodernist notion of an individualisation of emancipatory struggles. Others have objected and emphasised that notwithstanding a flexibilisation and an individualisation of participatory motivations, the symbolic construction of a collective identity still remains crucial for any social mobilisation (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). However, even forms of collectivisation and identity-forming itself might have changed and taken much more flexible, personal and individualised shapes. For instance, Gerbaudo and Treré underscore a continuing relevance of collective identity, but note that these identities themselves have become ‘marked by fluidity and evanescence’ (2015, p. 868).

This summary of emerging movements shows that the prevailing takes on emancipation in social theory are clearly reflected in contemporary forms of social movement organisations. This is no real surprise, as changing forms of mobilisations in movements and parties not only reflect changing emancipatory demands but also inform social theory. Contemporary emancipatory struggles emphasise the need for flexibility, contingency, reflexivity and process-oriented individual understandings of liberation. As Pickard (2019) has shown, there might be notable exceptions, and the landscape of contemporary emancipatory movements and mobilisations shows a heterogeneous mixture. Still, as a common denominator the formation of collective identities has become much less binding and emancipation is increasingly understood as an organisational task to be fulfilled by the individual citizen. As with political parties, these developments can themselves be understood as a *result* of emancipatory struggles: traditional, large-scale collective organisations with strong hierarchies and a strict and coherent mechanism of goal prioritisation (such as class, race, etc.) have, besides unquestionable emancipatory successes, also maintained heteronomies and patriarchies. These have been criticised for a good reason and as adaptive organisations, movements and parties reflect the way societies imagine political participation and pathways for emancipatory social change. Thus, there is no ‘way back’ to old, overcome, traditional understandings of hierarchical, class-based organisations of emancipation.

However, returning to the dialectic I seek to trace, contemporary notions of emancipation-motivated participation do not necessarily include changing society anymore – and instead focus on ever smaller identity demands or local realms of the individual citizen (Butzlaff & Deflorian, 2021; Deflorian, 2020). To give up on emancipatory utopias in the name of process-oriented, less patronising bottom-up notions of autonomy and liberation might just as well restrict emancipatory successes to much smaller radiuses. Although different understandings of prefigurative politics implicitly or explicitly include the notion of subsequently scaling up changes from the local to larger levels, the critique of lifestyle movements and political consumerism emphasises that the concentration on the local or the individual lifestyle might make changing society as a whole all the more difficult (Mocca, 2020). Also, as Bennet et al. (2018) as well as Deseriis (2020) have highlighted, seemingly emancipatory and democratising organisational change might very well lead to new authoritarianisms, centralisation and truly anti-emancipatory results even when fuelled by particularly emancipatory motives. Similar to the dialectic discussed with political parties, if the emphasis placed on

democratisation and deliberation of movements (which happens, of course, in the name of emancipation) leads to either shrinking effectiveness of the organisation or ‘serves to reinforce the conventional model of vertical linkage’ and a ‘managed interactivity’ (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 1659), it might cut off or fall short of what the very same movements had intended in their beginning.

Conclusion

In this article, I have set out to shed light on how conceptual ambiguities of emancipation that have been debated in social theory are reflected in the organisation of emancipatory struggles in political parties and social movements. I have shown that the way these ambiguities have been addressed in prevailing approaches in social theory – with emancipation’s meaning continuously shifting towards *more reflexive, self-centred, process-oriented* and *individualised* notions – has been embraced by contemporary organisational practices of liberation, democracy, autonomy and freedom. Movements and parties alike seek to allow for more individual, flexible, non-binding and identity-centred forms of participation in order to cater to shifting emancipatory demands. However, these shifts have serious consequences for how emancipation might be achieved and for whom. The dialectic of emancipation that I sought to trace in this article is that by rendering the organisation of powerful social counterforces ever more difficult, these shifts, while occurring in the name of liberation and autonomy, might even undermine the emancipation they had set out to propel.

The memoirs by Eribon, Ernaux, Vance and Louis, which I had addressed in the introduction, underscore that processes of individualisation not only make emancipatory successes highly dependent on individual resources and thus liberation only attainable to few. They also lead to a feeling of abandonment with those left behind. Furthermore, liberation from a closed and oppressive social milieu does not necessarily make one welcome in the milieu one aspires to be part of. As the historians Isaac Deutscher (2017 [1968]) and Yuri Slezkine have emphasised (2006), the emancipation of European Jews from their traditional orthodox communities in nineteenth century Eastern Europe highlights how liberation and autonomy might alienate. Often enough, they remained in a painful space *in between*, not accepted and viewed with suspicion by both, their Jewish milieus and families of origin, and the bourgeois societies of the European nineteenth century. It is not a coincidence that some of them joined the growing working-class movement, which offered a different reading of emancipation under the umbrella of a strong collective. Without an embedding in a collective organisation and a commonly shared emancipatory goal, it appears that emancipation might run the risk of not becoming the liberation of the underprivileged but in contrast the self-realisation of the better-off.

In light of the diagnosed organisational shifts in movements and parties, and possible in reaction to this, it might be the successful right-wing populists of today, which still rely on a strong sense of collective identity and belonging among their supporters (Blühdorn & Butzlaff, 2019). Claiming a collective emancipatory struggle of a national people, besides being aggressively exclusionary, they frame their reading of emancipation as a liberation from society being taken hostage by the excessive individual freedom

of the social elites; as a shelter and consolation of the people from being left behind; as a defence against moral decay. They make a disburdening offer of top-down, collective liberation and emancipation to those that feel overwhelmed by the demanding prospect of developing and realising individual emancipatory visions.

Rebughini (2010) has emphasised that contradictory notions of social critique that seem hard to reconcile in social theory in fact are coexisting in the practice of social mobilisations and protests. Thanks to new forms of digital communication and mobilisation, local, individual and contingent notions of liberation might be brought together productively with normative and abstract ideas of a better society. In her reading, the practice of organising emancipation might bridge the gaps that different takes in social theory have teared open. That, as a bottom line, demands for collective liberation and concrete utopias might go hand in hand with flexible, contingent and individualised notions. In her view, the dialectic of emancipation might not impair emancipatory struggles. However, as I have emphasised in this article, by looking at how movements and parties seek to organise emancipation and how they perceive of members and sympathisers, this reconciliation might look questionable. Reversely, individualistic, contingent, immanent and bottom-up understandings of emancipation have prevailed in movement and party organisation. In turn, top-down, collective, universalistic and normative takes on liberation have come under pressure. Emphasising the picture of a dialectic of the organisation of emancipation, as individual struggles become atomised, flexible and less binding, the task of confronting systemic and universal structures of power and domination becomes ever more difficult, and the organisation of effective and powerful social counterforces ever more unlikely. The reframings of emancipation in social theory, embraced by contemporary organisation of political parties and social movements, appear to render the organisation of emancipatory struggles – and hence: emancipation – ever more challenging. Nevertheless, as many have underscored, there is still a great need (and demand) for a strong collective and transcendental organisation of emancipation, without abandoning a recognition of individuality, difference or contingency (Dean, 2016; Fraser, 2003; Rebughini, 2010). In light of the current ecological crises and the rise of new authoritarianism (see also the contributions by Blühdorn, Swyngedouw and Lütjen in this Special Issue), addressing the dialectic of the organisation of emancipation might therefore be more pressing than ever.


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