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## International Aspects of Social Policy

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This chapter will focus on the ways in which international developments and institutions impinge on social policy developments within the United States. In an era of economic and social globalization, can social policy be purely national? The chapter argues that this was not the case in earlier eras, is not the case in the present, and is likely to be even less so in the future. Social policy can no longer be thought of in solely national terms in an economically and politically globalized economy.

Why the need to make the case? In the post-World War I euphoria about American economic and political leadership, and in reaction to the cynicism of Versailles as contrasted with the idealism of Wilson, strong isolationist themes appeared in the United States and were overcome only by the imperatives of World War II. The nation's economic and military achievements during the war, and subsequently, supported doctrines about a unique American character. That, and an underlying belief in the *specialness* of the history of this "first new nation" and in an American *exceptionalism*, tended to define the country as set apart and, to some, as morally superior (Lipset, 1963). We might export goods, technology, knowledge, and our experience with government, as we might import goods, styles, cultural materials and even workers, scholars, and performers. But large numbers of Americans doubted and still doubt that we have policy lessons to learn.

Let us look at the record.

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### The Earlier Record

Pre-Revolutionary War America was settled overwhelmingly by the English, and unsurprisingly, England's Poor Law set the main public pattern in the 17th and 18th centuries in the colonies and, later, in the states. Subsequently,

during the 19th century, the country continued to be influenced by English and occasionally German and other continental developments through visitors and reports, as it experienced the transition to a wage economy as required by the Industrial Revolution and shared with Victorian England the problem of *taming* the exploding cities and their poverty populations (Boyer, 1978). Americans were much influenced by England as they developed public workhouses and private (church and nonsectarian) associations to help the poor, such as the Association for the Improvement of the Conditions of the Poor; provident societies; YMCAs and YWCAs; boys' and girls' clubs; and child protection agencies, as well as charity organization societies, settlement houses, and kindergartens. Le Play's studies of expenditures and budgets in Belgium in the mid-19th century, Booth's studies of the life and labor of the people of London between 1886 and 1907, and the later work of Rountree in York inspired and guided late 19th-century social problem and poverty studies, including the 1905 poverty report of Hunter in Chicago and the famous Pittsburgh Survey (Polansky, 1975). When American states began social insurance and labor legislation in the Progressive Era, they had reports of European developments in hand (Skocpol, 1992).

After World War I, when the United States became a more powerful nation, some social policy borrowing began to occur from America to Europe, west to east, in particular with regard to social work education and casework practice. Nonetheless, east-to-west borrowing continued to be dominant. Thus, for example, the Social Security Act of 1935 was clearly influenced by what had been developed in Europe, again with special attention to Germany and England and with American adaptations required by our federal system and the political strategies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

## Post-World War II to the 1980s: The Shared Experiences of Modern Industrialized Societies

Following World War II, social policy learning and borrowing became increasingly active in both directions across the Atlantic. Although the experience of World War II was felt far more directly in Europe than in the United States and led to major new social policy initiatives in many countries, which set a standard that America has yet to achieve, subsequent experiences were far more likely to be shared.

Common demographic, economic, and technological trends have confronted all the advanced industrialized societies with similar challenges. For example, more than half of all births in the Scandinavian countries are now out of wedlock, as are more than one-third in Finland, France, and Britain. American rates are similar. Marriage rates in Europe are about half those in the United States, but so are divorce rates, although they are rising. Traditional families continue to decline in significance in Europe as in

America. Two-earner husband and wife families, reconstituted families, and families headed by cohabiting but not legally married couples now dominate the family environments in which children are reared. Yes, there are differences in female labor force participation rates, swings in fertility, differences in teen pregnancy rates, and different definitions of what some things (e.g., long-term stable cohabitation without marriage) signify. But important, even then, are the similar directions and challenges and the possibility of learning from differences. And some important differences (teen childbearing) occasion special interest and exploration. The advanced industrialized countries are a single demographic universe, and, thus, most must face similar issues.

The two most visible current illustrations are, first, the aging of the population while birthrates fall and, second, the rising rates of labor force participation among women with very young children. The industrial world is facing the shared issue of pension costs and pension financing while, at the other end of the age spectrum, because most mothers of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are now in the paid labor force, there is the issue of what kind of early childhood care and education to provide, under what auspices to provide such care, how to finance this, how to staff such a program, and what curricular and program concepts to use.

On another front, all relatively rich and stable countries among the pluralistic democracies are the obvious destinations of asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants from the poor, conflict-torn, authoritarian, underdeveloped, or transitional lands everywhere. Policies and programs in response are a high priority everywhere, even though the scale of the challenge, whether measured in sheer numbers or as a percentage of native population, varies considerably.

To move to another part of the policy spectrum, we refer to postsecondary education. Technological advances, the explosion of knowledge, and economic factors face countries with the issue of the normative levels of the education of youth. Whether out of concern for the quality of human capital with which it responds to economic challenges, out of a perspective on justice and equal opportunity, or with a view to preserve the country's cultural and civil traditions, each nation of the advanced industrialized world has been "churning" in this area: access, financial support to students and to higher education institutions, opportunities for advanced study and research, transitions into employment, and the nature of the core curriculum or whether there should be one.

There is no need to labor the point. Whatever the needs and differences of the developing and transitional worlds, there is considerable sharing of experiences in the advanced industrialized world and therefore considerable sharing of problems, issues, and tasks. And given the shared levels of education, research, and sophistication (despite historical, religious, and cultural differences) and the value systems of pluralistic democracies, it is hardly surprising that countries know about, consider, and sometimes

adopt or adapt one another's solutions and innovations. In this context, the United States, for all of its economic and political power and the many areas of technology, science, and popular culture in which it is seen in a leadership role, is also a learner, a cooperator, a borrower, and a participant. For example, as we began to design child support legislation in the 1970s and to discuss family policy, we learned much from Europe, and at one point relatively recently, there was intensive examination of German apprenticeship programs in this country. Our thesis is that this is a growing, increasing, and inevitable process. Some of the mechanisms, vehicles, and pathways of the process merit attention.

## **The Mechanisms of Internationalization**

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### **Demonstration of Effects**

We visit one another's countries as tourists, as professionals, as business people, as scholars, as exchange students, as members of delegations of one sort or another, or to retrace ancestral roots. Americans, who did most of the international visiting until relatively recently, discovered that their friends and colleagues were entitled to paid and job-protected leaves following childbirth, one-month and longer paid vacations from work, healthy and happy children in universal preschool programs, and health care that is readily available to all. None of this information exchange is formal or systematic, but it introduces a different world of other experiences and options, and it raises new issues for policy discussion.

The media, too, have facilitated more shared experiences. Television, in particular, has brought war, famine, floods, and earthquakes into the living rooms of Americans, Europeans, Asians, and others—and stimulated widespread concern about natural and man-made disasters. Societal responses, we hope, will also be far more immediate and personal than ever before.

### **Competitiveness**

As professionals, scholars, or citizen consumers of the media, we are exposed to international rankings with regard to infant mortality, low birth weight, child inoculation rates, child poverty, literacy, reading-math-science scores, and rates of high school completion revealed in annual reports such as UNICEF's *The Progress of Nations* or *The State of the World's Children* and its Innocenti Research Center report cards, the United Nation's *Human Development Report*, and the World Bank's *World Development Report*. Some of these numbers instigate professional exploration, political action, and interest-group advocacy. We are distressed at our ranking 28th out of the 30 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD) in infant mortality rates when all of our European counterparts and a mix of transitional economies and newly industrializing Asian countries rank ahead of us with significantly lower rates (UNICEF, 2006).

## Mandates

The International Labour Organization, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, has a long history of setting norms, targets, and labor and industry standards, which have affected the United States along with the rest of the world. Conventions, agreements, and covenants adopted by the United Nations have had even more significant impacts. *The Economist* magazine noted in connection with the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the "world's central legal institution, the United Nations, was the brainchild of Franklin Roosevelt who began planning for it soon after the United States entered the war. His wife, Eleanor, was one of the prime movers behind the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" ("World Law," 1998, p. 16).

But the United States public, in some instances, and its Congress, in others, do not readily accept and adopt international mandates, even when our citizens contribute substantially to their formulation. Traditionally, there has been suspicion of foreign involvement, and it can reach paranoid intensity under some circumstances. Moreover, unlike the many unitary parliamentary systems that find ratification of covenants relatively easier for parliamentary majorities, the United States federalism and our separation of powers offer a major obstacle course for all major covenants. For example, can the Senate provide all the assurances called for in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, given the preeminence of state law in most areas of family law, child welfare, and education?

Yet, the failure to ratify, often after signing, is not the whole story. What is also relevant is that these various internationally adopted instruments create international norms. Even where we are well in advance of world practice, as we are in many of these fields, such as the status of women, the covenants nonetheless are useful in some instances. Where we do not conform, reformers and advocates have a point of departure. The subject gets into public discussion. Sometimes it goes further. Commenting on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Wronka (1995) observes that "this document, which was originally meant to be hortatory, is increasingly referred to, at least in the United States, as 'customary international law'" (p. 1407). He buttresses his argument with a series of U.S. court decisions, including a finding against a military commander for torturing and murdering a Paraguayan high school student. In short, without "authoritative legal status in the United States" the declaration "is beginning to substantively affect U.S. legal jurisprudence" (p. 1407).

The United States participates as well in many other United Nations' activities and projects, often initiatives of the General Assembly or the Economic and Social Council. The special "years" and "decades" dedicated to spotlighting the elderly, the handicapped, or children highlight policy and program issues often in the context of elaborate factual reporting and trend analysis as well as international comparisons. While the developing world is often in focus, the rich countries are not ignored—whether at the World Summit on Social Development (Denmark), the Beijing conference on women, or in other initiatives—or in the annual United Nations' reports on human development. Mandates and commitments aside, all of this keeps some United States issues visible and offers challenges—and rallying points—for leaders and advocates.

### Collaboration

The United States plays a leading role in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which has expanded to include 30 advanced, industrialized, pluralistic democracies. Although formally focused on economic policy, over the years, this organization has carried out projects, convened expert groups, and conducted ministerial level inter-governmental meetings with regard to female labor force participation, child care, aging, lone-mother families, income transfers, work training, youth policy, education at all levels, tax policy, urban policy, and various interrelationships among these. The rationales have stressed the relationships of various of these arenas, and others, to a conception of an active "labor market" policy or to equal opportunity, or technological progress, or human capital investment—and even to pension finance.

In fact, in the past several years, concerned about pension financing under almost universally experienced population aging, OECD has promoted, among other things, facilitating female labor force participation through adequate child-care policy, thus improving the ratio of currently employed workers to retirees.

OECD's regular data series (including expenditure and tax data and various social indicators), its annual national accounts reports, the analyses of the tax situations of "average" worker families in different countries—as well as the conferences and project reports—play an important role in disseminating valuable information to public officials in all countries. Although the organization is not as visible to the media as is the UN, and although public officials and civil servants in all countries—especially in the executive branch—who are exposed to it rather than the public at large, it is extraordinarily successful in creating an ongoing international conversation about critical issues in economic and social policy. For example, see the following OECD publications *Family, Market, and Community: Equity and Efficiency in Social Policy* or *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care*,

2001–2006 or *Babies and Bosses*, 2002–2007, a five-volume description, assessment, and analysis of family-friendly child and family policies focused on the reconciliation of work and family life in more than a dozen member countries.

One could wish for more congressional exposure as well. None of this is to ignore the neoliberal slant of OECD, the considerable American and British influence, especially during the restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s, but in the spirit of balanced debate and eclectic policy making, and in appreciation of international exchange, one must value this organization, which exposes the United States to world developments, thinking, and viewpoints about country opportunities. Indeed, in some sense, each of the sources of information and exchange is controversial for some Americans, but the sum total of interactions means that we are hardly alone in thinking about our social policies.

### Cross-National Research and Societal Learning

We here offer a personal illustration of learning from other countries. Although, in our own professional careers we have been involved with all of the above from time to time and in varied capacities, our own efforts at systematic contributions to the domestic social policy debate from the broader international experience have taken the form of a cross-national research program that parallels and feeds into our United States policy research and activity. We realized long ago that one can no more develop a full perspective on policy systems and policy substance by studying policy in one country than a clinician can conceive and elaborate a personality theory if limited to one case. The political science answer is the comparative study. The world is an arena of natural experiments.

For over 30 years, we have conducted studies of social policy issues, many in child and family policy, encompassing income transfers (cash and tax benefits), employment-related policies (maternity and parental leaves), and personal social services—all with a view toward enriching the policy debate in the United States. Because of the objective of immediate relevance, most of this work has been in the advanced industrialized world, much of it in Europe, but recently it has covered some developing countries as well. We have been concerned more with understanding the consequences of policies for families, children, and, sometimes, the community and the work environment than with accounting for country choices, but that, too, has sometimes been the question. We understand that policies must fit into the cultural, societal, and political context and therefore are often not directly transferable, but we see the value of enriching and elaborating the option menus in fields in which the United States *needs to act* (Kamerman & Kahn, 1995).

At one time, we were pioneers and among the few with such preoccupations. More recently, as Europe has organized itself more formally and,

then, as what are called the *countries in transition* entered the picture, such work became more popular and has been systematized and expanded, as we note below.

First, to clarify, we offer some personal illustrations. Our studies in the industrial world, from the 1970s to those currently under way, have been concerned with various topics. We have asked what types of policies and programs have been developed in western and northern Europe on behalf of typical families, not for the poor alone (Kahn & Kamerman, 1975). We have also examined the issue of whether governments deliberately or implicitly undertake to develop family policy and, if so, in what domains and how (Kamerman & Kahn, 1978). Another issue has been how personal social services are organized and delivered in industrial societies. This study included a look at socialist Europe, which had labeled social work a capitalist instrument (Kahn & Kamerman, 1980). We have also examined international experiences with child care services and family benefits as alternatives or possibly complementary strategies for coping with family needs when both parents (or a single parent) work (Kamerman & Kahn, 1981). Our research has also focused on how public (social) assistance fits into a full income maintenance and tax package in helping families at different earnings levels (or without earnings) and how generous income transfers are elsewhere as compared with those in the United States (Kahn & Kamerman, 1983). We have questioned how countries cope with the child support question when parents separate and divorce and whether advance maintenance (government support guarantees or child support assurance) is a successful program when the noncustodial parent does not contribute (Kahn & Kamerman, 1988). Another issue is what the experience with more extended parental leaves is and how such leaves affect child care policies, maternal labor force participation, and child-conditioned income transfer packages (Kamerman & Kahn, 1991). We asked what the policy options are for responding to the needs and problems of lone mothers and their children, as seen in the European experience (Kamerman & Kahn, 1988). Finally, we have speculated on what the United States can learn about "starting right" in the rearing of its youngest children from countries with exemplar programs and policies relating to income, time, and services (Kamerman & Kahn, 1995).

Of course, the study and report writing are only a beginning. Contributions to domestic programs and policy require dissemination, education, and advocacy. Impact, if any, can be limited and slow.

### **Major Current Vehicles**

Interchange, cross-national contacts, and collaboration are at all-time highs, and data about other parts of the world, particularly the industrial world, are more available in more systematic form than ever. This is



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inevitable given the technology of the information age and the great values recently placed on national and international transparency with regard to the economy, the polity, health, and human rights.

In our brief sketch, we note, first, that, where once there was little European interest in cross-national policy research and data collection, the European Community, now the European Union (EU), began, as it grew, to attend to child-care services and family policy. Although not formally in the EU's "competence," such social policy issues as parental leave and child care are relevant to its concerns with regard to the labor force and the status of women. A European Child Care Observatory with country reporters and, later, a European Observatory on Poverty and a European Family Observatory, similarly structured, have provided annual updates on developments in member countries as well as special reports on topics of general interest. (The European Child Care Observatory has been discontinued and the European Poverty Observatory has been replaced by a European Observatory on Social Exclusion.) A growing system of statistics and social indicators out of Eurostat enriches the picture of demography, programs, expenditures and various aspects of policy. What is more, the growth of the European Union and the fall of the east-west wall stimulated a rich array of cross-national research by European scholars, where once interest was limited. We might mention studies of poverty and social exclusion, child support, social assistance, lone mothers, and the workforce.

In brief, there is now a significant body of information and evaluated experience for cross-national learning and stimulation. On a smaller scale, but with much interest in family policy, there is also relevant output from the Council of Europe.

By now, the two-way flow is extensive. There are visiting scholars at universities and think tanks, often at work on cross-national issues and always available to clarify developments in their own countries. The major learned societies and professional groups are an active arena of shared and joint learning. We might cite the long-term deliberations and projects related to poverty of the International Sociological Association; the family policy, divorce, child support, and other deliberations of the International Society of Family Law; and the range of topical themes at the International Council on Social Welfare.

Associated with international and learned societies and associations, but also independent of them, is an extraordinary roster of international journals covering the fields under discussion. Indeed, the proliferation poses both a cost problem for libraries and a time challenge for interested policy scholars and officials.

A major international collaboration with very strong American presence, the Luxembourg Income Study, has not only built up an extensive micro database over the past two decades, which includes data from 25 modern industrialized states, but also perfected the adaptations to ensure comparability and supplied the associated institutional and program information

that permits the most extensive comparative studies of poverty, family income packages by family type, and specific income-related policy questions. Researchers all over the world are supplied with disks of constantly updated data and codes. Summer conferences and workshops provide the occasion for exchange and for training young scholars. A parallel program, the Luxembourg Employment Study, is now being implemented as well. All these research initiatives now have rich Web sites as well that provide current information about important policy-relevant developments.

Knowing about other countries is not any longer a monopoly of scholars, specialists, public officials, or travelers. The media have discovered aspects of social policy on which they can report to interested audiences, whether in the daily press, general magazines, or on television and radio. The casual reader or audience member learns about welfare, social security, health systems, child care, or parental leaves, sometimes in sophisticated coverage and, at other times, in oversimplified and brief presentations.

## Globalization and the Impact on Social Policy

*Globalization* is the current buzzword used to describe the growing internationalization of the production of goods, services, and the flow of capital. Economists, political scientists, sociologists, area specialists, and policy analysts are discussing the world economy and the implications of global economic developments for the future of social policy (Clayton & Pontusson, 1997; Cohen, 1998; Daly, 1998; Garrett, 1997; Pierson, 1994, 1995; Taylor-Gooby, 2004). There is a debate regarding whether globalization applies only to the changes occurring to the world economy as national economies are internationalized or whether it applies as well to current changes in political, social, and cultural institutions. Despite widespread agreement that worldwide competition means that economies with high wage costs will lose jobs to those with cheaper labor, there continues to be debate as well about whether such job loss is limited to unskilled work; whether, ultimately, it is good or bad for national economies; whether it will affect the composition of the wage package or just the overall size; and whether a "race to the bottom" among welfare states will follow, reducing wages and cutting social expenditures. Most important, there is a debate regarding the overall process of globalization, whether it is the cause of welfare state retrenchment and whether it will lead to high rates of dependency either on unemployment benefits or social assistance or both, thereby raising social expenditures, reducing social security contributions, and leading to cuts in benefits and services. The ultimate concern for many is how will these developments affect social policy?

There are many who believe that globalization is ultimately a positive process, even though they see the difficulties it creates. Difficulties may include, for example, jobs migrating from high-wage and high-benefit countries to

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low-wage and low-benefit labor markets, country budgets and economic policies being undercut by currency speculation and developments in world equity and bond markets, and precious aspects of national identity being eroded. Others are much concerned about the impacts on population. As the president of the Washington-based Economic Policy Institute observed,

The mobility of private capital has now outstripped the capacity of governments and international agencies to keep markets from self-destructing or to shield their people from the brutal consequences. One result . . . is a rising hostility to globalization. A precondition to any solution is the building of institutions and policies that serve the interests of the world's workers. (Faux, 1998, p. 1)

Even *The Economist* magazine, a proponent of the free market, commented, in noting the unexpected problems generated in the East Asian economies and by the recklessness of hedge funds, that "the idea of globalization as irreversible inevitably will face stiff challenges" ("Human Rights," 1998, p. 16).

Whichever the correct assessment of globalization, there is no denying that, for the advanced industrialized societies, there are now shared policy agendas with answers to be discovered by joint learning, learning from one another, exchange and consensus, and through experience. We can debate about contours and likely governance, but—to shift the metaphor—we are in the same boat. A potentially helpful process is under way, but it will be a hesitant one because countries are not sure whether to trust it and how far. But they need to understand it together.

Societal learning is no longer a question of east-west learning or of trans-Atlantic two-way learning. Instead, it is an issue of shared experiences and problems and the need to work together to participate in the development of policy and program responses. Social policy can no longer be purely national; it requires international or regional or multinational initiatives. It involves countries working together to respond to the same or similar challenges.

To illustrate: A June 1998 Stockholm meeting on pension policy jointly sponsored by the Swedish government and the International Social Security Association, one in a series, capped a consultative process and drew on a specially commissioned study (Thompson, 1998). The sessions probed a series of social security, public pension, and private pension models for the future, as these were evolving in Europe, North America, Central and South America, and East Asia in the light of economic and demographic developments. In a context of sophisticated understanding of the consequences of free international markets, it was possible to examine the known advantages and caveats for systems based on advance funding, individual accounts, and public management, with special attention to what can be said about pension impacts on the economy. The meeting's purpose was put by the organizers on these terms: "to assist policy makers and social security

organizations throughout the world to understand the issues, to widen the debate on the future of social security, and to choose alternatives best suited to their circumstances" (International Social Security Association, 1998).

For a second illustration, from 2001 to 2006, the OECD carried out a 20-country review of early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies and programs, exploring why countries are increasingly interested in the subject and what can be learned from the experiences of different industrialized countries (OECD, 2001–2006). The study was carried out by teams of international and national experts and scholars and covered the economic and demographic contextual factors driving these policies as well as the major policy developments and lessons learned from the other countries. The review culminated in an international conference and a two-volume report. The major conclusion was the importance of universal ECEC programs for children's education and well-being and the importance of integrating child care and early childhood education into one early childhood system.

A third illustration is the multiyear and multicountry OECD (2002–2007) study of "family friendly" child and family policies, a study that targets the reconciliation of work and family life. Family friendly policies are those policies that facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life by ensuring the adequacy of family resources, enhancing child development, facilitating parental choice about work and care, and promoting gender equality in employment opportunities (OECD, 2002–2007). The specific policies include parental leaves; affordable, decent quality ECEC; child-conditioned income transfers; and flexible work schedules.

There is also reverse learning occurring, from South and Central American countries to North America. An interesting example is the child-conditioned cash income transfer program. These conditional cash transfers (CCTs) developed first in Mexico and are now established in about half the Latin American countries (Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007). CCTs are cash benefits provided monthly to families with young children, contingent on the children being enrolled in and attending school and the parents obtaining regular free health checkups for the children and other family members. The objective is to reduce income poverty and to increase human capital by expanding children's access to education and health care. In April 2007, New York City's Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced the launch of a CCT pilot program called Opportunity NYC, the first such program launched in the United States and modeled after the Mexican program.

There are parallel undertakings under way in many fields related to child and family policy, such as early child care and education or youth training and education; and there is shared work on needed technologies and data systems, such as child and social indicators and poverty measures. In addition, there are studies on the impacts of these policies on children's well-being (Kamerman, Neuman, Waldfogel, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Therefore, in conclusion, the answer to our original question is that, early on, the United States learned and borrowed from others. Later on, it continued to learn and borrow, but it also provided opportunities for others to learn and promoted initiatives that others borrowed from too. Now, we all learn and borrow, sometimes from one another but more often as part of the same global pool of knowledge, experience, and ongoing exploration. Social policy is a shared arena.

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