THE NEOLIBERALISATION OF STRATEGIC SPATIAL PLANNING

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Abstract
Despite the fact that strategic spatial planning practices recently have taken 'a neoliberal turn' in many European countries, 'neoliberalism' and 'neoliberalisation' are rarely used as analytical concepts in planning theory. This paper seeks to fill in part of this gap by examining the relationship between neoliberalism and strategic spatial planning. This is done through an analysis how the key theoretical ideas underpinning strategic spatial planning might be appropriated by neoliberal political agendas in planning practice. In conclusion, the paper argues that neoliberalism and neoliberalisation are helpful analytical concepts to examine and understand contemporary transformations of spatial planning discourses and practices, and that planning theory by adopting such analytical concepts can play an important role in assisting critical empirical studies of how spatial planning practices are being transformed under neoliberalism.

1. Introduction

In the planning literature, significant attention has been paid to the renewed interest in strategic spatial planning spreading across Europe from the beginning of the 1990s[i] and across the UK from the beginning of the 2000s[ii]. So far this 'revival of strategic spatial planning' (Albrechts, 2004; Healey et al., 1997; Salet and Faludi, 2000) has been treated as rather unproblematic in the planning literature, celebrated amongst planning scholars as a welcome opportunity to recover the lost ground of the planning scepticism in the 1980s. Strategic spatial planning has been seen as a new way of transforming planning practices, effectively breaking away from the neoliberal project-led planning approaches in the 1980s, and the mid-20th century welfare state planning based on land use regulation (Albrechts, 2004). This perspective still dominates the strategic spatial planning literature, despite increasing discussion of neoliberalism as a hegemonic discourse in urban policy-making and spatial planning in the more critical-minded literature.[iii] The core argument in this literature is that the fields of urban policy-making and spatial planning are today underpinned by a more pragmatic version of 'roll-out' neoliberalism, in which the state plays an active role in supporting market logics by putting policy objectives of economic growth and competitiveness in the centre of spatial policies.

In the planning literature, neoliberalism has often been associated with large-scale urban development projects (Swyngedouw et al., 2002). However, more recently it has been argued that neoliberalism penetrates planning practices in many different

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aspects of planning (Tasan-Kok and Baeten, 2012), including strategic spatial planning practices (Allmendinger, 2011; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012; Cerreta et al., 2010, Haughton et al., 2010). Empirical research from many European countries suggests that strategic spatial planning across Europe has recently taken 'a neoliberal turn',[iv] as it has been noticed how "the ideal of strategic planning could easily be used to favour the most aggressive neoliberal models of urban and regional development" (Cerreta et al., 2010, p.x). This has led to an increasing awareness that strategic spatial planning practices are unable to resist the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism. Instead, strategic spatial planning practices seem increasingly to be guided by neoliberal political agendas, reinforcing a post-political condition in which neoliberalism as a hegemonic discourse within spatial planning remains largely unquestioned (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012).

In fact, strategic spatial planning practices seem to provide a smokescreen for neoliberal transformations of spatial planning in different ways (Cerreta et al., 2010, Haughton et al., 2010). This process of 'neoliberalisation of strategic spatial planning' can be understood as "the ongoing project to install market logics and competitive discipline as hegemonic assumptions" (Purcell, 2009, p.140) in planning processes. Tasan-Kok and Baeten (2012) has argued that concepts such as 'neoliberalism' and 'neoliberalisation' have generally been overlooked in planning theory and planning research, despite getting increasing attention in other social sciences. In the planning literature, there are very few empirical studies, which critically analyse how planning systems, spatial logics, and strategic spatial planning practices are changing and being transformed under neoliberalism over time in particular settings, and what the implications of such transformations are. This paper contributes to fill in part of this gap by analysing the relationship between neoliberalism and strategic spatial planning. The aim is to offer some theoretical insights and initial building blocks on which such future empirical analyses of contemporary neoliberal transformations of spatial planning practices may build.

In this paper, I firstly attempt to draw out the relationship between neoliberalism and the revival of strategic spatial planning in the beginning of the 1990s. I argue that a particular model of 'roll-out' neoliberalism played an important role in paving the ground for reviving and (re)legitimising strategic spatial planning practices in Western Europe at the time. Secondly, I seek to demonstrate how some of the key theoretical ideas underpinning strategic spatial planning, that is communicative planning, relational geography, and soft spaces, might be appropriated in planning practice to support neoliberalism as a hegemonic discourse in spatial planning. Finally, I argue that neoliberalism and neoliberalisation are helpful analytical concepts to examine and understand contemporary transformations of spatial planning discourses and practices, and that planning theory by adopting such analytical concepts can play an important role in assisting critical empirical studies of how spatial planning practices are being transformed under neoliberalism.

2. Neoliberalism and the Revival of Strategic Spatial Planning

Until recently, critique of neoliberalism in urban policy-making (and spatial planning) was a topic reserved to critical geographers writing predominantly from a Marxist or neo-Marxist perspective (Castree, 2006). More recently, 'roll-out' neoliberalism has been associated with the state spatial project of reviving strategic spatial planning in Western Europe, predominantly in the UK under the New Labour era (Allmendinger, 2011; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009b, 2010; Haughton et al., 2010). Yet also in other European countries like Germany, Denmark, and Belgium 'a neoliberal turn' in spatial planning has recently been reported (Murray and Neil, 2011; Olesen and Richardson, 2012 forthcoming, 2013 forthcoming; Van den Broeck, 2008).

In this section, I first outline the main characteristics of neoliberalism, drawing out two different models of neoliberalism: 'roll-back' neoliberalism and 'roll-out' neoliberalism. Second, I attempt to draw out the relationship between the less visible model of 'roll-out' neoliberalism and the revival of strategic spatial planning in Europe in the 1990s.

2.1 Two Models of Neoliberalism

The basic assumption behind neoliberalism is that "society functions better under a market logic than any other logic, especially a state-directed one" (Purcell, 2009, p.141). In many ways, neoliberalism attempts to reintroduce Adam Smith's concept of 'the invisible hand' from the 1750s, as a metaphor of how the market is more efficient in allocating resources than the state. In the context of globalisation, neoliberalism has more recently been presented as the only way to promote economic growth and competitiveness. Here, neoliberalism should not only be understood as a set of policies, but as a political ideology promoting the argument that there is simply no alternative to the market in allocating resources effectively (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Purcell, 2009). Alongside this legitimising argument of no other alternatives, neoliberalism has since the 1980s developed into a dominant 'common-sense' discourse, in which market competition, including creation of a business friendly environment, has become a necessary (and at times the only) value in decision-making (Purcell, 2009). Peck and Tickell (2002) refer to this development as the normalisation of a 'growth-first' approach to urban development.

The more recent literature on neoliberalism distinguishes between neoliberal ideology in its pure theoretical form, and what is referred to as 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002), which tends to have a more pragmatic form in practice. Peck and Tickell (2002) divide the 'actually existing neoliberalism' into two different models. The first model of neoliberalism, which is closer to neoliberalism in its pure ideological form, is often associated with the elections of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US in the 1980s. In the context of economic recession and increasing globalisation, neoliberal state policies were introduced, which sought to promote market logics and competition in the

public sector, whilst reducing the role of the state to a minimum. This more well-known model of neoliberalism is often labelled 'roll-back' neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002) or *laissez-faire* (let-do) neoliberalism (Purcell, 2009).

During the 1990s, a different model of neoliberalism emerged, which is much further apart from the neoliberal ideology and therefore potentially less visible in practice. This model is described as 'roll-out' neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002) or *aides-faire* (help-do) neoliberalism (Purcell, 2009). In this model, the state plays a much more active role in facilitating the accumulation of capital. The state is actively intervening in the market by among other things generating public investments into infrastructure and urban development projects in order to support market logics and competition. This softer form of neoliberalism has also been associated centre-left governments such the former New Labour government in the UK (Allmendinger, 2011, Haughton et al., 2010; Peck and Tickell, 2002). It is this latter model of neoliberalism, which in many ways helped to pave the way for the 'revival of strategic spatial planning' in Europe in the beginning of the 1990s.

2.2 The Revival of Strategic Spatial Planning

In the mid-20th century, spatial planning was mainly concerned with growth management through preparation of structure plans. It was widely recognised that a strategic approach to land use planning was needed to manage the rapid population growth and urbanisation processes characterising Europe at the time (Healey et al., 1997). In this period of spatial Keynesianism (Brenner 2004), spatial planning played an important role in correcting market failures by distributing growth and economic development evenly across state territories, providing services for a reasonable quality of life. In the 1980s, this core idea of planning came under pressure in the increasingly neoliberal political climate. Here, policies of 'roll-back' neoliberalism resulted in an increasing disbelief in planning, which was largely regarded as restricting economic growth and competitiveness. This was in particular the case in the UK, but also in many other European countries the state's role in planning was reduced, whilst planning tasks increasingly were left to the private sector, or various forms of quasi-public or public-private organisations. Planning was increasingly directed towards the market and became more project-oriented, focusing primarily on large-scale urban development and infrastructure projects (Allmendinger, 2011; Healey et al., 1997).

Whilst this new understanding of the core idea of planning as facilitator of economic growth and competitiveness first resulted in a disbelief in planning and a 'roll-back' of the nation state in the 1980s, these ideas were later put in the centre of the new strategic spatial planning emerging in the 1990s. Here, strategic spatial planning was increasingly seen as an activity for positioning cities and city-regions in the European competitive landscape or within a global market (Albrechts et al., 2003: Healey et al., 1997), promoting what Brenner (2004) refer to as the neoliberal competitive state. Rather than focusing on expanding the welfare state by promoting

equal development across the state territory, public investments were generated into major cities and urban regions, promoting a new set of spatial logics centred on major cities and urban regions as key sites for economic activity. We might thus understand the new strategic spatial planning practices emerging from the beginning of the 1990s as an attempt to transform the core idea of planning to fit the increasingly neoliberal political climate.

In the planning literature, the new strategic spatial planning has been articulated as a substantially different activity than traditional land use planning and neoliberal project planning (Albrechts, 2004, 2006; Healey, 2007; Healey et al., 1997). Planning scholars have seen the renewed interest in strategic spatial planning as an opportunity to transform planning practices and rebrand planning after a decade of considerable planning scepticism. This means that strategic spatial planning remains a rather elusive concept, defined just as much by what it is not, as by what it is (Haughton et al., 2010). Friedmann (2004) notes how it is difficult to find a clear-cut definition of strategic spatial planning in the planning literature. Instead, the understanding(s) of strategic spatial planning seem to remain somewhat implicit among planning theorists (Needham, 2000), deeply rooted in different European planning cultures. This is perhaps not surprising as 'spatial planning' was invented as a Euro-English term in process of preparing the *'European Spatial Development Perspective'* (ESDP) (CSD, 1999), as an attempt to capture the essence of various European planning traditions such as the French *aménagement du territoire*, the Dutch *ruimtelijke ordening* and the German *raumordnung* (CEC, 1997). Strategic spatial planning might thus mean different things in different contexts and planning cultures. On one hand, strategic spatial planning has been used as an umbrella term to describe a range of different planning activities taking place across Europe since the beginning of the 1990s at scales above the local governance level. On the other hand, it has been used within planning theory and by planning communities to promote a new set of normative ideas about what constitutes 'good planning' (Haughton et al., 2010).

These elusive characteristics make strategic spatial planning rather vulnerable to neoliberalisation. In the next section, I discuss how the key theoretical ideas underpinning strategic spatial planning might be appropriated by neoliberalism in planning practice.

3. The Neoliberalisation of Strategic Spatial Planning Practices

The new strategic spatial planning practices emerging in Western Europe from the beginning of the 1990s have been the subject of considerable interest in the planning literature. In academia, planning scholars have sought to elaborate and refine the concept of strategic spatial planning by adding a normative theoretical dimension to the concept in order to guide future planning practices. In this section, I attempt to demonstrate how the key theoretical ideas underpinning strategic spatial planning expose strategic spatial planning practices to neoliberal political agendas, which seek

to maintain the status quo and reinforce existing power structures. The key theoretical ideas that I discuss in this section are communicative planning, relational geography, and soft spaces.

3.1 Communicative Planning as a legitimising tool for neoliberal discourses?

Alongside the revival of strategic spatial planning in planning practice in the beginning of the 1990s, planning theory seemed to be taking a communicative turn (Healey, 1992) in which communicative planning was presented as a new paradigm within planning theory (Innes, 1995). Communicative planning ideas had a significant influence on the theorisations of strategic spatial planning, which was conceptualised as collaborative social mobilisation exercises aiming at transforming policy discourses and planning practices (Albrechts, 2004; Healey, 1997, 2007).

Here, a spatial strategy is said to have a transformative potential, if the core ideas behind the strategy are able to mobilise support and gain recognition, as they travel from arena to arena across an increasingly fragmented governance landscape (Healey, 2007). Such a strategy, it is argued, needs to be both selective by prioritising some issues over others, and synthetic in integrating diverse issues under the shelter of a single frame (Albrechts, 2004; Healey, 2007). To be successful, a spatial strategy requires the prospect of win-win situations in which all actors involved gain something from participating in the process, and develop a shared recognition of that handling particular issues is beyond the capacities of the single actor (Albrechts, 2001). Empirical research by Albrechts (2001) and Olesen and Richardson (2012, forthcoming) suggests that such win-win situations are more likely to be designed within certain policy fields, such as transport (including investments in transport infrastructure).

This expectation or requirement of win-win situations or ‘consensus’ in collaborative spatial strategy-making processes has recently been highlighted as highly problematic in the planning literature (Hillier, 2003; Purcell, 2009; Pløger, 2004), as it seeks to remove disagreements, conflicts, and political ideology from planning processes. As all participants in collaborative planning processes will serve their self-interest, and indeed are expected to do so (Innes, 2004; Innes and Booher, 2010), win-win situations will per definition not fundamentally transform existing power structures, but rather contribute to reinscribe these in the particular planning process (Harris, 2002; Purcell, 2009). A focus on designing win-win situations will therefore contribute to maintaining the status quo rather than supporting social mobilisation around issues of conflict. In fact, communicative planning practices might (unintentionally) legitimise a reinforcement of the status quo, including neoliberalism as a hegemonic discourse, as outputs from collaborative and consensus building processes are generally considered more inclusive, fair, and democratic (Purcell, 2009).

Here, Mouffe's (1999, 2000) theory of agonism is helpful, as it helps us to understand how a focus on win-win situations and consensus building suppresses conflicts and politics and depoliticises strategic spatial planning processes. This post-political planning condition has been furthered by a neoliberal discourses promoting the idea that win-win(-win) situations such as sustainable development can be designed and achieved through spatial planning practices (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2010). In the UK and possibly in many other European countries, we see a planning system and spatial planning practices emerging, which

> "gives the superficial appearances of engagement and legitimacy, whilst focusing on delivering growth expedited through some carefully choreographed processes for participation which minimise the potential for those with conflicting views to be given a meaningful hearing." (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012, p.90)

3.2 Relational Geography as a Medium for Depoliticisation?

As part of the theorisation of strategic spatial planning, there has been an increasing concern with bringing the ideas of relational geography into the field of planning (Davoudi and Strange, 2009; Graham and Healey, 1999; Healey, 2004, 2006, 2007). The new relational conceptions of space and place set out to break with the Euclidean and absolute view of space, which dominated spatial plans in the mid-20th century (Davoudi and Strange, 2009; Healey, 2007). Instead, a relational understanding of spatiality draws into attention the multiple webs of relations or 'spaces of flows' (Castells, 1996) that intersect or transect urban areas, and opens up for multiple ways of understanding or getting to know an urban area (Healey, 2007).

The ideas of relational geography have played a dominant role in European spatial planning discourses since the beginning of the 1990s. Here, a new spatial vocabulary of networks, webs, flows, nodes, and hubs has been introduced as new, more up-to-date organising principles (Davoudi and Strange, 2009; Healey, 2006). One of the ways, in which planning practice has tried to see the world through webs, flows and networks, has been through what Davoudi and Strange (2009) refer to as 'fuzzy maps'. Rather than relying on Euclidean geometric accuracy, these 'fuzzy maps' depict the planned territory as fluid with fuzzy boundaries (Davoudi and Strange, 2009).

Whilst, the use of fuzzy spatial representations can be understood as attempts to appropriate the ideas of relational geography in planning practice, they also seem to fulfil other (and perhaps more important) roles. First, fuzzy spatial representations seem to play an important role in distancing spatial planning from its regulatory characteristics normally associated with Euclidean geography, thereby supporting the discourse of a new core idea of spatial planning.

Second, fuzzy spatial representations can be understood as the result of attempts to broker agreement or build consensus in strategic spatial planning processes. The planning literature stresses how spatial representations are highly political sensitive constructs, as they more clearly depict the potential 'winners' and 'losers' of a given spatial policy (Dühr, 2007; Jensen and Richardson, 2003; Zonneveld, 2000). The 'fuzziness' of a spatial representation, or the absence (or presence) of a spatial representation in a spatial strategy, might therefore reflect the extent of consensus among actors in the process (Jensen and Richardson, 2003). Faludi and Waterhout (2002) and Zonneveld (2000) have for example illustrated how the spatial politics in the ESDP process remained highly contested and prevented the European member states from agreeing on a policy map depicting the future European territory.

In cases where fuzzy spatial representations are prepared, their abstract characteristics might provide convenient temporary spaces for consensus. Here, the suggestive nature of fuzzy maps might play an important role in avoiding controversial or politically sensitive issues, such as distribution of future urban development (Davoudi and Strange, 2009; Olesen and Richardson, 2011). The representational vagueness of fuzzy spatial representations becomes then an effective means for camouflaging or blurring the spatial politics of strategy-making. In this way, relational geography and in particular the use of fuzzy spatial representations in planning practice might act as a medium for depoliticisation.

3.3 Soft Spaces as vehicles for neoliberal transformation of spatial planning

More recently, strategic spatial planning has been associated with the new 'soft spaces with fuzzy boundaries' emerging in-between formal scales of planning in the UK (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Haughton et al., 2010) and beyond (Olesen, 2013 forthcoming). These new soft spaces can be understood as a mix of i) new spatial imaginations promoting new informal planning spaces located outside the formal planning system and formal scales of planning, and ii) new networked forms of governance seeking to work outside the rigidities of statutory planning.

Although, the strategic spatial planning literature does not refer explicitly to soft spaces, these spaces seem to share similarities with what Healey (2007) refers to as a restless search for policy integration and joined-up government at the scale of urban regions. According to Healey (2007), strategic planning efforts have at times to move away from formal planning arenas in order to destabilise existing policy discourses and practices, and this is what soft spaces seem to do. This search for new opportunities for strategic thinking and breaking away from pre-existing working patterns by working outside formal planning arenas is what seems to characterise soft spaces.

However, contrary to Healey's (2007) understanding of informal strategic spatial planning, the new soft spaces emerging in the UK seem to have an explicit neoliberal

agenda. In the UK, the emergence of soft spaces has been associated with transformations of spatial planning under the former New Labour government. Here, the soft spaces are characterised by New Labour's pragmatic view on spatial planning, focusing on 'what works in practice' in terms of implementation and policy delivery (Allmendinger, 2011; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009b). They reflect attempts to short-circuit formal planning requirements and move beyond the rigidities of statutory planning in order to facilitate development. Furthermore, the soft spaces seem to be defined in ways that deliberately are fluid and fuzzy, so they easily can be amended and shaped to reflect different interests and challenges (Haughton et al., 2010). This flexibility manifested itself in the transformation of the soft spaces' rationale in UK in aftermaths of the global credit crunch, where, the soft spaces were transformed from functional spaces for policy integration and coordination to vehicles for policy delivery and growth Allmendinger (2011).

In this way, we might understand soft spaces as a reaction against statutory planning, which is perceived as incompatible with neoliberal political agendas of promoting economic development. Olesen (2013, forthcoming) has for example demonstrated how spatial strategy-making in soft spaces in Denmark was used to unsettle a particular Danish approach to strategic spatial planning rooted in a rational comprehensive planning and social-welfarist perspective, by calling for more flexible and solution-oriented forms of strategic spatial planning. Often soft spaces seem to promote certain agendas and certain ways of thinking about strategic spatial planning, which reflect a neoliberal understanding of society. In this sense, we might think of soft spaces as vehicles for promoting a particular neoliberal version of strategic spatial planning.

4. Conclusions and Future Challenges for Planning Theory

The concept of strategic spatial planning has played an important role in breaking the planning impasse of the 1980s by adjusting the core idea of planning to fit the increasingly neoliberal political environment. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, strategic spatial planning has been promoted as a substantially different practice than traditional land use planning (Albrechts, 2004), paving the ground for a new set of planning practices primarily concerned with positioning cities and city regions in a European competitive landscape (Albrechts et al., 2003; Healey et al., 1997). Within these strategic spatial planning practices, economic growth and international competitiveness have evolved into common-sense policy objectives, reinforcing neoliberalism as a hegemonic discourse within spatial planning. In this way, the revival of strategic spatial planning was partly supported and partly legitimised by the emergence of 'roll-out' neoliberalism as the dominant political-economic agenda in Europe from the beginning of the 1990s.

Furthermore, empirical evidence of spatial planning practices seems to confirm the thesis that strategic spatial planning has recently taken a neoliberal turn in many European countries. This paper has sought to illuminate how this neoliberalisation

of strategic spatial planning are taking place in planning practice, by drawing attention to the emerging contradictions within the key theoretical ideas underpinning strategic spatial planning, when these are examined in the context of neoliberalism as a hegemonic discourse in spatial planning. The paper has demonstrated how the theoretical ideas of communicative planning, relational geography, and soft spaces might be appropriated by neoliberal political agendas in planning practice, supporting the contemporary neoliberalisation of strategic spatial planning.

The theorisations of strategic spatial planning have been criticised for being too naïve (Bengs, 2005) and too theoretical (Newmann, 2008), thought too far from the current realities of the socio-political contexts in which strategic spatial planning takes place. At the moment, we seem to know very little about how neoliberalism affects spatial planning practices, and what the potential consequences of the contemporary neoliberalisation of strategic spatial planning might be. What seems to be missing in contemporary theorisations of strategic spatial planning is a critical understanding of how the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism shapes strategic spatial planning practices. Building up such an understanding is crucial if we are to move beyond the 'more of the same' thinking that Albrechts (2010) recently has criticised.

Here, I see a value in bringing analytical concepts such as neoliberalism and neoliberalisation into planning theory and planning research. By incorporating these analytical concepts, planning theory has a stronger foundation for assisting critical empirical studies of how strategic spatial planning practices are being transformed under neoliberalism. At the moment, there is only limited work which seeks to conceptualise the relationship between strategic spatial planning and neoliberalism, and only limited empirical research, which critically analyses how strategic spatial planning ideas might be appropriated by neoliberal political agendas in planning practice. In an environment without a strong theoretical critical mass and sufficient theoretical insight, critical studies of strategic spatial planning practices might have limited resonance in planning practice, and powerful actors and policy agendas will continue to shape and transform planning practices unchallenged. There is a need to build up a strong theoretical and empirical foundation on which such critiques can build. I believe that this is an appropriate and important role for planning theory and planning research in the future, and at least one way for planning scholars to influence and hopefully improve planning practices.

Notes

i) Examples here include Albrechts (2001, 2004, 2006), Albrechts et al. (2003), Healey (2004, 2006, 2007), Healey et al. (1997), Kunzmann (2001), Salet and Faludi (2000), and Sartorio (2005).

ii) Examples here include Allmendinger (2011), Davoudi and Strange (2009), Harris and Hooper (2004), Haughton et al. (2010), Morphet (2011), Nadin (2007), and Tewdwr-Jones et al. (2010).

iii) See writings of Brenner (2004), Brenner and Theodore (2002), Peck and Tickell (2002), Purcell (2009), and Raco (2005).

iv) Examples from the UK include Allmendinger (2011) and Allmendinger and Haughton (2012), and examples from continental Europe include Murray and Neil (2011), Olesen and Richardson (2011, 2012 forthcoming, 2013 forthcoming), and Van den Broeck (2008).

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