## **In the Dead Zone of Capitalism: Lessons on the Violence of Inequality from Chicago**

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Americans are confronted daily with the violence of inequality. The rich have longer life spans, better health care, access to better educational opportunities and an abundance of food. [1] Many live in palatial homes in gated communities and wield a disproportionate amount of control and power over the major social, cultural, and political apparatuses that shape everyday life.[2] Unlike most Americans, the extravagantly rich are protected from the massive degree of violence produced by poverty, poor health, joblessness, inadequate social provisions, decrepit housing, unsafe neighborhoods, and even environmental disasters. While the superrich also live in an age of precarity due to the free-market economic models they support, they largely escape its consequences through the obscene amount of wealth at their disposal that enables them to buy private solutions to public problems.[3] As Naomi Klein points out, such wealth offers more than economic advantages. It also creates a world in which the penthouse and mansion set  
  
protect themselves from the less savory effects of the economic model that made them so wealthy. In the past six years, we have seen the emergence of private firefighters in the United States, hired by insurance companies to offer a ‘concierge’ service to their wealthier clients, as well as the short-lived ‘HelpJet’—a charter airline in Florida that offered five-star evacuation services from hurricane zones [whose ad shamelessly states]: ‘No standing in lines, no hassle with crowds, just a first class experience that turns a problem into a vacation. [4]  
  
The corrupt bankers, hedge fund managers, and financial services elite who caused the housing crisis and the economic recession of 2008 have little fear of finding themselves homeless or in debt, a fate suffered by millions of Americans, especially young people. The hedge fund managers who pour millions into charter schools as a first step towards privatizing them don’t worry about draining valuable resources from public schools because their kids only attend the most elite and expensive private schools, and they also get a hefty return from such investments as a generous tax credit. [5] Transferring wealth from the public to the private sector has become a sport rather than a liability - a despicable act of looting the public treasury that is viewed strictly as a financial transaction divorced from any sense of civic duty or ethical consideration. The ultra-rich do not have to worry about being unemployed, even though their search for profits produces austerity policies that put millions out of work. [6] In this instance what emerges is a savage form of casino capitalism along with an army of walking dead zombies who celebrate a narcissistic hyper-individualism that radiates a near sociopathic lack of interest in other people and civic life. For the new financial elite of the second Gilded Age, the challenges of a global world are private, not collective, and can only be addressed by pursuing one’s own desires, financial interests, and security.   
  
The obligations of citizenship and social existence in this brave new world of egregious inequality in which the "top 8% of global earners are drawing 50% of this planet’s income" [7] have been abandoned to the narrow dictates of the private realm, consumerism and an arrested notion of individualism and freedom. In the United States, "the 400 richest people . . . have as much wealth as 154 million Americans combined, that’s 50 percent of the entire country [while] the top economic 1 percent of the US population now has a record 40 percent of all wealth, and have more wealth than 90 percent of the population combined." [8] It gets worse. Half of the jobs in America "now pay $34,000 or less a year . . . 42% of single-mother families with children under 18 are poor [and] 20.5 million people have incomes that amount to less than $9,500 a year. That’s half the poverty line, which is currently pegged at $19,090 for a family of three." [9] Moreover, the myth of upward mobility has been replaced by the reality of downward mobility, given that wages for most Americans are stagnant; youth now face a future of low-wage jobs, if not long-term unemployment, and economic and educational opportunities are tied almost exclusively to income and wealth. What the cheerleaders for neoliberalism refuse to acknowledge is that the choices people make are tied to constraints, and "nearly all of the constraints are intimately tied to the material circumstances in which we find ourselves." [10]  
  
As public visions fall into disrepair, the concept of the public good is eradicated in favor of the narrow, private orbits of self-interest and individual happiness, characterized by an endless search for instant gratification, consumer goods and quick profits. The value of everything from education to health care is measured by how profitable it might be for those who treat such institutions less as a public good than as a source for private gain. There are no ethical dilemmas here, only opportunities for increasing the bottom line and making greed the highest of human values and desires. Such behavior is legitimated by appeals to a competitive philosophy in which everyone is either an enemy to be punished or a resource to be exploited, used, and eventually discarded in the quest for personal and financial success. Citizens have been replaced by consumers, and the search for profits regardless of the social costs has created a society in which the accumulation of capital trumps any concerns about fairness and justice. Snapshots of growing inequality are symptomatic of a society that has divorced itself from any sense of moral and social responsibility. Surely, the recent deaths of hundreds of workers in unsafe factories in Bangladesh speak to how disposable human beings have become under a market-driven system in which the desire for cheap labor by companies such as Wal-Mart, Sears, Disney, and others takes precedence over the health, dignity, and lives of poor workers.  
  
 The growing levels of injustice in every facet of life barely provoke outrage because they are wrapped in a disimagination machine that ascribes inequality to the natural order of things, an act of nature in which hard work and merit prevail in great riches and comforts for the few and impoverishment for the many. Yet, even this timeworn myth is rarely evoked anymore. The current crop of super-rich financiers is much too arrogant and comfortable to provide a rationale for their extreme wealth and power. All forms of violence are now factored, if not ignored, into the call for economic growth, abetted by the cowardice of the mainstream media that act as paid servants for the rich and the growing prominence of a political apparatus that enriches itself on the benefits provided by an army of corporate lobbyists. [11]  
  
The spectacle of the new Gilded Age reveals itself in the huge incomes and unimaginable amounts of wealth being amassed by the upper 1 percent. For instance, hedge fund manager Steven Cohen of SAC Capital Advisors took home $1.4 billion in 2012, while Ray Balio, Bridgewater Associates founder, made $1.7 billion and David Tepper of Appaloosa Management made $2.2 billion the same year. [12] Paul Buchheit reports that the Koch brothers make about $3 billion per hour on their investments, while the poorest 47 percent of Americans have no wealth. [13] While many young people face a jobless future, billionaires such as Bill Gates, Leon Cooperman, and others do more than drain wealth and income from the larger society; they also destroy those institutions that serve the common good, undermine the public interest, and gut the most basic elements of a viable social contract. Buchheit has argued that "a single top income could buy housing for every homeless person in the United States." [14] Not only do the rich and powerful shape policies that lower corporate tax rates while bleeding states of much needed revenue, but they also attempt to compensate for the loss of public revenue by closing public schools in cities such as Philadelphia, Chicago and New York City. Austerity has become a ruthless ploy to "cut spending to the point where government [becomes] unrecognizable." [15]  
  
The neoliberal policies funded by the new financial elite cut funding for programs such as Head Start, eliminate breakfast programs for poor children and portray people on food stamps as freeloaders. The latter baseless insult is particularly vicious since the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is crucial for low-income children living in extreme poverty because it "greatly reduce[s] food insecurity . . . which, in turn, greatly enhances their chances of doing well in school and growing up to be successful, productive adults."[16] The Republican Party’s engineering of the so-called sequester is not about balancing the budget. It is about waging war on poor minorities and low-income youth, public schools, the welfare state, unions and social programs for women and other disadvantaged populations. Such inequality of power and wealth produces massive amounts of human suffering for millions of Americans who are marginalized by age, race, gender, disability and socio-economic class.   
  
 In Texas, 1.5 million low-income people will lose health care because of the ethos of savage capitalism relentlessly enforced by Governor Rick Perry and his fellow lawmakers. These bible-thumping disciples of "free-market" capitalism have "voted against expanding Medicaid using $100 billion in federal funds offered under President Obama’s health care law," insisting that government-sponsored health care demeans character and rewards people labeled by conservatives as lazy and contemptible.[17] Of course, the populations considered disposable here are low income and poor minorities, of whom 35 and 32 percent, respectively, suffer from poor health and shortened life spans. As Goran Therborn points out, inequality is not simply about the gap between the rich and the poor: It is about the inequities in life expectancy between the privileged and disadvantaged.[18] The dividing line in American society is no longer between those who have made it and those trying to emulate their success. On the contrary, the dividing line is between those who live a life of unimaginable privilege and comfort and those who are struggling to survive and stay alive.  
  
There is more at stake here than a symbolic violence that objectifies the vulnerable and produces insensitivity to their problems. There is the real violence that aggravates poor health, shortens lives and produces a machinery of individual and social death. Martin Luther King, Jr. was right when he pointed to two Americas, stating insightfully that "the other America" is inhabited by people "perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity." [19] What he did not envision was that those considered part of the other America are now viewed not as disadvantaged, but as utterly disposable. In the new order of casino capitalism, people continue to live in rat-infested slums, but they are also increasingly warehoused in jails and prisons, which now rank as the most prominent institutions of the welfare state. And if they do not perish in prisons, they die from illness caused by the failure of government to regulate big business.  
  
As Ralph Nader recently noted: the effects of deregulation stretch to all walks of life. The profit-driven practices of big corporations have led to the deaths and preventable illnesses of thousands of Americans every year. Roughly 60,000 die from workplace-related diseases and injuries, 200,000 from medical malpractice and hospital-induced infections, 70,000 from air pollution and 1,000,000 from side effects from dangerous pharmaceuticals. [20]  
 The daily ugliness of the violence of inequality perpetrated on millions of Americans finds its counterpart in the culture of cruelty, produced by the dead zone of capitalism and sanctioned by big corporations and the ultra-rich who preserve a disordered autoimmune system for the nation that destroys the defenses protecting any viable notion of democracy and justice. The financial elite and their political stooges resemble not only the main character in Oliver Stone’s 1987 film Wall Street, with its infamous "greed is good" credo, but increasingly the more disturbing character in Bret Easton Ellis’s novel made into the 2000 film American Psycho, who literally kills those considered disposable in a society in which only the strong survive. While Wall Street is a critique of the celebration of greed and the institutions that make it possible, it captured a particular moment in American history when the values of the Gilded Age were resurfacing under the presidency of Ronald Reagan with a vengeance. American Psycho is about the subjects, identities, and desires being produced for those who are leading America into an authoritarian dystopia in the 21st century in which safety nets are destroyed, civil liberties dismantled, gated communities proliferate, prison populations dramatically increase, and pervasive violence circulates at the level of everyday life. Both films crucially capture something about the downward ethical, economic and political spiral produced by casino capitalism. The hero of contemporary American capitalism is also modeled after John Galt on steroids, the character from the infamous Ayn Rand novel Atlas Shrugged who transforms the morality of self-interest into a secular religion for the socially disabled. The fictional characters Gordon Gecko, Patrick Batemen and John Galt are now personified in the real life personas of the Koch brothers, Lloyd Blankfein and Jamie Dimon, among others.   
  
The ruthless ethos of predatory capitalism is now producing a more intense and wide-ranging spectacle of symbolic and real violence. State violence now finds its counterpart in the white male rage aimed at the poor, minorities, students, and protesters - a rage that appears rampant among the police, Republican Party politicians, gun advocates, right-wing Christian extremists and most Tea Party members. And this hyper-masculine propensity for violence is endlessly legitimated in television shows that celebrate serial killers, Hollywood films that drench audiences with extreme spectacles of violence and a surfeit of video games that turn first-shooters into heroes. Abroad, such violence assumes a real life dimension as drones kill innocent people, soldiers murder women and children for sport (the Kill Team in Afghanistan), and demented soldiers mimic the comic book and film superheroes whose mission appears to be to rid Gotham City of the poor (the murdering rampage of Sergeant Robert Bales in Afghanistan. [21]  
  
The violence produced in a growing dystopian authoritarian state is now sanctioned in a class and racially skewed justice system in which people are given long prison sentences for smoking marijuana but not for defrauding the public out of billions of dollars. Major banks such as HSBC launder money for terrorists, defraud millions of their financial assets and destroy all vestiges of a social democracy. They are not only considered too big to be held accountable but extolled as the vanguard of educational reform, propped up as icons in a tawdry celebrity culture and allowed to determine policies at the highest levels of government. This is about more than the arrogance of power. It is about the death of justice and democracy. This is a culture in which inequality in wealth, income, and power breeds more than social and economic disparities; it also produces a kind of moral blindness and spiritual vacuum that overtakes politics, justice and any viable vision of the good society. [22] In a society plagued and battered by a ruling financial and corporate elite that embraces and suffers from an ethical coma, it becomes more difficult for the American public to recognize the machinery of corporate domination, greed and abuse that increasingly revels in a culture of cruelty.  
  
The weakening of public values has created a power elite marked by a self-righteous coldness that takes delight in and makes a sport out of the suffering of others. The lifestyles of the poor are portrayed in the media as a form of poverty porn in which "the worst and weakest moments of people’s lives are [portrayed] as funny and entertaining." Is it any wonder that within the last decade there has been a proliferation on the Internet of "Bum Videos," in which homeless people are videotaped as they are beaten by young people, who view such violence as a form of entertainment? The descent into barbarism is now matched by the elimination of the discourse of compassion and the proliferation of abuses hurled at the poor, immigrants and others viewed as outside the pale of economic Darwinism. In fact, the current neoliberal era unscrupulously embraces the take-no-prisoners attitude of a culture of cruelty and the widespread violence it produces. We have seen this before in the robber barons of the first Gilded Age, but what is new in the current historical juncture are the widespread social and moral sanctions given to the ethos of greed and cruelty, along with the intensification and visibility of spectacles of violence. The new elite is building what Robert Jay Lifton once called "a death-saturating age" in which the growing extremes of wealth are matched by an increasing number of cultural representations and public policies that relish the practice of throwing away and abandoning not just resources and goods but also people.  
  
The signs of such a culture of cruelty can be witnessed in the pronouncements of wealthy politicians insisting that students who receive free meals should work for their food. They are evident in the discourse of conservative media pundits and anti-public intellectuals who argue that poverty is a personal failing and demand that the poor be punished by slashing their meager benefits. Of course, this would mean punishing almost half of the American public who are in or near poverty. [23]We hear it in the words of prominent Republicans such as Newt Gingrich, who has denounced child labor laws as "truly stupid" while suggesting that poor youth should be put to work in schools as janitors. We hear it from hypocrites such as Tennessee congressman Stephen Fincher, a Republican who wants to cut $20 billion from food stamp legislation, justifying such cuts by quoting the Bible. As it turns out, Fincher personally collected nearly $3.5 million in farm subsidies between 1999 and 2012. [24] We see the culture of cruelty displayed in the horrifying echoes of the crowds that cheered when Representative Ron Paul in a Republican debate argued that if a young man who did not purchase health insurance found himself with a deadly illness, then he should have to bear the burden alone, and the government had no responsibility to provide health care that would prevent him from dying. In other words, society should look the other way as he died. We catch a glimpse of such a culture in the despicable practices of a Bronx bus company that once offered tours billed as "a ride through a real New York City ‘GHETTO.’" [25] But the culture of cruelty is perhaps most evident in the increasing criminalization of school children who more often than not inhabit schools in which the police harass and punish them for trivial behavior infractions. [26]  
  
Unfortunately, rarely is the culture of cruelty and the suffering it causes for young people connected to larger neoliberal forces produced by a militarized form of casino capitalism. We can catch a glimpse of how these forces impact each other in the recent decision by Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel to close down 50 public schools, mostly inhabited by poor minorities, impacting some 30,000 students. Emanuel’s decision to close down a record number of public schools is one more recent example of a savage, racist neoliberal system at work that uses the politics of austerity and consolidation to further disenfranchise the unskilled young of the inner city. Of the 50 schools targeted to be closed, 49 serve elementary school children, "90 percent of whom are African American (in a district that is only 40% African American)." [27] This is a policy in which there is a high threshold of violence that reveals the operations of a machinery of power, death and destruction committed to destroying all communal relationships.  
  
That many of these Chicago children are poor black youth trapped in under-resourced schools appears irrelevant to a mayor who takes his lead from politicians such as Barack Obama and Arnie Duncan - two educators who, despite being Democrats, have intensified the George W. Bush educational reform playbook. The ill-fated consequence of this so-called educational reform movement is that equity is removed from excellence. The apt neoliberal moniker given to Obama’s Race to the Top educational policy supports more testing, demonizes teachers, weakens unions, advocates for choice and charter schools, and turns public schools over to the market-based ideology and values of corporate hedge fund managers, conservative billionaires and right-wing foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Bradley Foundation and the Michael and Susan Dell foundation. In Chicago, Emanuel’s passionate zeal to close public schools in impoverished black neighborhoods is matched only by his misdirected enthusiasm to lay out $55 million on a hotel that will benefit the University of Chicago and $300 million on a basketball arena for DePaul University, both of which are private Chicago universities.[28] Emanuel claims he is shutting down 50 schools because the city is broke, but as Ben Joravsky points out in The Chicago Reader,  
  
Of course, as broke as we are, there’s still $55 million lying around to buy some land and hand it over to private entities that don’t need it. Because there’s the kind of broke that means we don’t have any money for schools, and there’s the kind that means we don’t have money to subsidize the rich and powerful. We haven’t come close to reaching that second kind of broke - and probably never will, so long as this mayor’s in charge. . . . Since the deal costs $55 million, we’ll have less money to spend on schools. Which means most of them will still go without music, art, drama, intramurals or reduced class sizes. [29]  
Jesse Sharkey, vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union, who is helping lead the campaign against school closings, has argued that Emanuel’s claims that school closings are necessary to save money and will better serve students are a sham. According to Sharkey,  
  
both rationales are outrageous. As far as saving money, the district is planning - or the city is going to spend - $300 million to renovate a new stadium for the DePaul basketball team and the tourist areas of the city; we don’t believe the school closings will save that much money. And we definitely don’t think that this will actually help the students who are being affected. In all the previous rounds, we found that the University of Chicago research shows that over 90 percent of the students actually wind up with worse educational outcomes as a result of their schools being closed. So, this will be very harmful to the students. It’ll be harmful to the public school system as a whole, and to the people who work in the schools, as well. [XXX  
Carl Gibson, cofounder of the movement U.S. Uncut, is even more specific in challenging the argument that only by closing schools can the state and city reduce the budget deficit. He argues that while it is true that the Chicago schools face a $1 billion deficit, what is often overlooked in the corporate media is that Illinois "loses $4.8 billion annually in federal tax dollars to corporate tax loopholes that shift profits overseas. [Moreover], a small tax on Wall Street transactions would raise roughly $150 billion a year, more than enough to offset the cuts that are closing 50 schools." [31]  
  
Other critics of Emanuel’s approach, such as Justin Panon, have pointed out that Emanuel solidly hangs his hat in the corporate boardroom and kneels at the altar of big corporations and the ultrarich and powerful, "so much so that Chicago residents presented his office with a golden toilet after he handed over $15 million in tax rebates to the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. This slush fund money had originally [been] earmarked for the renewal of public infrastructure." [32] What is also hard to miss in Emanuel’s educational policies is "that many of the targeted schools exist in areas deemed ripe for gentrification," which may explain why Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis has made clear that "since 2001, 88 percent of students impacted by the CPS School actions are African American, and this is by design." [33] In many ways, Emanuel is just intensifying the neoliberal strategy started by Arne Duncan who initiated the neoliberal policy of closing schools in Chicago as part of his corporate-driven Renaissance 2010 plan. As Diane Ravitch points out, while Duncan’s plan for Chicago did "close lots of schools and open many more - it did not improve education." [34] Also hard to ignore, given Emanuel’s infamous penchant for revenge and the fact that there will be little cost savings, is that the closings largely serve as payback against the teachers’ union for having waged a strike that generated by negative publicity for the mayor in September 2012.   
  
Unfortunately, Emanuel’s actions in Chicago also mimic neoliberal policies that are playing out in other cities across the United States. The violence of inequality and the culture of cruelty produced by the advocates of neoliberalism represent the Wild West of finance capital and are creating vast zones of suffering, terminal exclusion, and disposability. Emanuel would rather protect the wealth of corporations than invest in public schools. No democracy can survive under such circumstances. Emanuel’s educational policies are just one more indication of the violence being waged on young people, teachers, the poor, racial minorities and others who believe in public values, the dignity of democratic institutions and an ideology in which sharing, trust, justice, and individual and social empowerment should not be regulated by the market. Resisting Emanuel’s policies in Chicago has to be connected to resisting other institutions that support casino capitalism and a broader politics of rampant and depoliticizing consumerism, a culture of cruelty, and the rise of the punishing state.  
  
Politics and educational policy are not disconnected from wider market-driven relations of power, governance, and ideology. Democracy, when measured by the yardstick of profit, turns in on itself and eats away the formative cultures, spheres of dissent, and social relations that make it possible. What Emanuel is doing in Chicago is just another version of the ruthless ideological and economic forces at work in the United States that display a deep symmetry with an updated form of authoritarianism now dominating the American landscape. Catherine Clement has stated that "every culture has an imaginary zone for what it excludes." [35] She is right, and the class, racial, and power relations that create such zones have to be made visible through a new understanding and claim to democratic politics, pedagogy, and collective struggle so that the institutions, ideologies and power relations that currently dominate the United States can be properly reformed or identified as the rightful candidates for disposability.   
  
What is taking place in Chicago is a window into a savage form of capitalism that transfers public wealth into private hands, believes that individuals have the right to profit from the loss of public goods and dissolves public considerations into private troubles. Emanuel’s market-driven practices need to be understood as part of the broader contexts and circulation of power as well as the sinister heritage whose history runs through the advocacy of apostles of neoliberalism such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and the institutions that enforce neoliberal practices globally such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. [36] Emanuel is simply the latest incarnation of neoliberal austerity economics, which found its most acute expression in the dystopian authoritarian experiment conducted in Chile by the dictator General Augusto Pinochet in the 1970s and 80s, with the help of the Chicago boys, and continues to this day to shape policies all over the globe. In this case, the present as created by Emanuel does more than mimic the past: it makes it worse and portends a future of dark times. Emanuel’s embrace of the dead zone of capitalism is part of a 50-year campaign to impose the juggernaut of privatization, consumption, incarceration, disposability and class warfare to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a few corporations and the ultrarich. At the same time, Emanuel’s policies are true to the neoliberal playbook of smashing labor unions, punishing dissent and claiming that the country is too broke to invest in "the education of our young, or rebuild our crumbling infrastructure or continue to provide Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid, or expand health insurance." [37]  
  
Fortunately, the struggle to build social movements and transform an unjust society into a just one is taking place not only in Chicago, but in Paris, Athens, Cairo and in many other cities throughout the world. Chicago and other movements, including the Occupy movement, are redefining liberty as a collective good that is incompatible with the hollow shell of freedom produced by economic and social inequality endemic to the structural violence of predatory capitalism. Marginalized youth, workers, artists and others are raising serious questions about the violence of inequality and the social order that legitimates it. They are calling for a redistribution of wealth and power - not within the old system, but in a new one in which democracy becomes more than a slogan or a legitimation for authoritarianism and state violence. As Stanley Aronowitz and Angela Davis, among others, have argued, the fight for education and justice is inseparable from the struggle for economic equality, human dignity and security, and the challenge of developing American institutions along genuinely democratic lines. [38] Today, there is a new focus on public values, the need for broad-based movements for solidarity, and alternative conceptions of politics, democracy and justice.   
  
The actions of Chicago teachers exemplify a wider call for moral outrage and more democratic schools, models of leadership,and education that are wedded to producing young people who are engaged and critical citizens, willing to fight for the ongoing democratization of American society. Chicago is no longer simply a city in turmoil, nor is it simply the site of a courageous protest movement. It is a zone of hope which offers a snapshot of the collective struggles to come and the role that education might play in such a struggle. And if those struggles are to matter, demonstrations and protests must give way to more sustainable organizations that develop alternative communities, autonomous forms of worker control, collective forms of health care, models of direct democracy and emancipatory modes of education. There is a need both to educate the American public about the violence being waged by the corporate and repressive state and to make clear that government under the dictatorship of market sovereignty and power is no longer responsive to the most basic needs of the American people. A future that can provide sustainable jobs, decent health care, quality education and communities of solidarity and caring depends on the efforts being made now to awaken the public to its current reality.  
  
For this reason, any collective struggle that matters has to embrace education as the center of politics and the source of an embryonic vision of the good life outside of the imperatives of predatory capitalism. This is a difficult task, but what we are seeing in Chicago, Athens and other dead zones of capitalism throughout the world is the beginning of a long struggle for the institutions, values and infrastructures that make community the center of a robust, radical democracy. The American public has reached the endpoint of accommodation. Emanuel is just another example of why such a struggle is as necessary as it is just.

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