

Man Plants, Woman Nurtures

Reflections of Older German Men

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Constructions of Masculinity and the Sexual Binary

The unremitting socio-cultural power of the sex binary is astonishing when considering that biological evidence for a division of humans into only two sexes is far from being unambiguous (Feinberg 1996; Kessler 1998; Rubin 1997). Nonetheless, the binary construction of sexual difference is so deeply implanted in the individual from the day one is born that gendering oneself univocally as a man or a woman is essentially the foundation from which one cultivates all other aspects of identity development.

The division between the sexes appears to be 'in the order of things', as people sometimes say to refer to what is normal, natural, to the point of being inevitable: it is present both – in the objectified state – in things (in the house, for example, every part of which is 'sexed'), in the whole social world, and in the embodied state in the habitus of the agents, functioning as systems of schemes of perception, thought and action. (Bourdieu 2001, 8)

As a consequence, it is practically impossible for men as well as for women to avoid the socio-cultural and largely unconscious process of sexual indoctrination (Bourdieu 2001, 7–33) within which masculinity is associated with predominantly positively connoted aspects such as strength, dominance, rationality and control, while connotations af-

filiated to femininity centre around notions of passivity, submission, helplessness, emotionality and empathy – characteristics which are, in the occidental world, often valued considerably less than the supposedly male attributes (Schippers 2007, 85–102).

By linking male dominance and female submission to biological pre-determination, patriarchy has been defined as representing the ‘natural order of things’, thus legitimating its rule beyond doubt (Butler 2011, 124–50; Schippers 2007, 85–102). At the same time, and intertwined with the contrasting construction of femininity and masculinity, their interdependence is also assumed, since one narrative gains authority only by referring and comparing it to the other.

Raewyn Connell’s now widely accepted definition of masculinity is unique in its reference to precisely this relationality between understandings of femininity and masculinity (Schippers 2007, 85–87). As a cultural construct, masculinity is defined as the result of an interplay between the respective culture, the individual personality as expressed in actions and of positioning oneself in opposition to other men and women. “Masculinity’ [...] is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practice through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture,” (Connell 2005, 71). Understandings of masculinity thus depend on and are affected by the geographical region, by the historical period and its respective values and norms as well as by societal and politico-economic developments (Baur and Luedtke 2008, 9).

However, as context-dependent as constructions of masculinity are, what seems to recur and tie together hegemonic understandings of masculinity across time is the significance attributed to being in control and active, and to displaying and incessantly proving dominance. “The hegemonic definition of manhood is a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power. We equate manhood with being successful, capable, reliable, in control” (Kimmel 1994, 125). Successful performances of masculinity are hence dependent on incessantly establishing and maintaining dominance, control and potency throughout the life-course (Calasanti & King 2005, 10).

Ageing and retirement rob older men of a meaningful role that supported the feeling of all-encompassing agency and linked it to status and individual significance. Older age, therefore, not only seriously impedes men's claims for patriarchal privileges and hegemonic status, but it also challenges their sense of self (Chivers 2011, 99–138; Coston and Kimmel 2012, 99–110; Jackson 2016, 1–26). Therefore, the questions arise as to how men who have retired and who most likely experience a decrease in capabilities handle these age-related changes and how they incorporate aspects linked to ageing into the construction of their older male identity.

Within this context, I was particularly interested in exploring how men, who have during major periods of their adult lives, been part of the hegemonic class of men and who were as a result never forced to find ways of handling marginalisation (Calasanti & King 2015, 193–200; Coston & Kimmel 2012, 97–111; Tarrant 2010, 1580–1591), manage the natural decline in physical and mental abilities and linked reduced level of control and the loss of the identity-constituting professional role in older age. These and linked queries guided the selection of the four interviewees in the focus of this paper.

For above mentioned reasons, it was crucial to select interviewees who used to match a majority of the criteria linked to hegemonic masculinity. The four interviewees selected have been exceptionally successful in their careers, are white, heterosexual and married – criteria which firmly mark them as belonging to the hegemonic masculinity ideal of corporate masculinity promoted in the West (Cheng 1999, 298; Connell 2005, 71).

All interviewees were at the time of the interview between 72- and 79-years old and had been officially retired for some time (Bühring, 2020, XXIX–CXXXI).¹ As a result they witnessed and experienced many societal and politico-economic developments throughout the course of their personal and professional lives which, as highlighted above, instigated alterations in the socio-cultural views of masculinity, particularly

1 References regarding the interviews conducted refer to the pages of the transcripts in Bühring, 2020.

of hegemonic understandings of masculinity in the West. To better understand how their lived experiences of, for instance, post war Germany, of the second, third and present wave of feminism (Tasker & Negra 2007, 1–26), of pre and post divided Germany and of professional employment over the course of thirty years and, most importantly, retirement have impacted their view of masculinity (Cheng 1999, 295–315; Connell 2005, 67–81; Connell 1993, 597–623) has motivated the interviews with the participants.

All interviewees participated enthusiastically in the interviews. The openness and willingness of the informants to talk about their experiences, worldviews and the high level of trust they showed towards me, which was emphasised by the fact that only one of three participants wished to be anonymised, allowed me to gain in depth insights into their identity construction throughout their life-course. The inclusion of my father as an interviewee was also motivated by my wish to further my understanding of older masculinity constructions. My father used to fit the hegemonic masculinity ideal in many ways, and given our closeness and my knowledge of his experiences, I believed he could provide particularly crucial and relevant insights into the identity construction of older German men who used to be part of the hegemonic class of men. In addition, it seemed logical to me to include, at least, my Dad in the research since observing my parents' very different approaches towards managing the ageing process has been the main reason for my research focus.

In my view, the high level of cooperativeness the interviewees showed and the combination of similarities and differences of the informants led to a particularly interesting research context which contributed considerably to the depth of the data, and thereby significantly facilitated a better understanding of how these four German men experienced the process of ageing (Haraway 1988, 589–90; Harding 1992, 63–72).

Reflections of Older German Men on Masculinity and Femininity

One of the significant findings of my semi-structured interviews, has been that the perception of the sex binary as genetically predetermined was carried forward into older age (Bühring 2020, 155–164). The informants assigned attributes such as activity, rationality, and determination to men and passivity, emotionality, and of naturally being caring to women; and they drew on this understanding of sexual difference also to construct their identity in older age (Bühring 2020, 105–139). To illustrate this, I will present in the following some quotes from the interviews². Burkhard Rosenfeld defined masculinity as follows:

To me, masculinity means to have the ability to take part in reproduction and play a crucial role in it. Masculinity is also linked to this traditional understanding of the male respectively female role. That is that the men of the cave people went hunting and the women were responsible for the part, which took care of the family. The man provides the family with protection, and the woman provides emotions and feelings (Bühring 2020, XXIX).

For Lars Bühring masculinity is characterised by:

[...] drive, determination, well, another word, activity, to be responsible for others. Ultimately to be able to also live with the consequences, which in his surrounding in some way have significance and to identify himself with them and to derive, well, then the suitable consequences and activities. Well, really it is the opposite of passive (Bühring 2020, CVIII).

Burkard Rosenfeld and my father both followed a similar train of thought when the former suggested that masculinity had been determined in early human history when men were the hunters and protectors of the

2 Transcripts of interviews can be found in Bühring 2020, xxix-cxxxi

family while the latter named, among other attributes, activity as a core element of masculinity (Fausto-Sterling 2008, 3–12).

Günther Schotten replied, when asked what determined masculinity for him: “Well, masculinity means to me a...the attempt to think stringently and also a certain amount of physical effort and a strong reference to rationality, a highly rational life,” (Bühning 2020, LIII). When I then enquired if these characteristics must be viewed as in opposition to female attributes, he confirmed that by saying: “To a certain degree, yes,” (Bühning 2020, LIII). Later on, he specified his definition of masculinity by referring to the “problem of masculinity” which he defined as “performance orientation with a strongly systematic approach,” (Bühning 2020, LVI). Some minutes later the topic came up again, and Günter Schotten referred to his wife who introduced the idea of the “masculinity gene”, which she defined as being “performance-oriented, Yang-excess, to prove oneself, that you can still do it and so on” (Bühning 2020, LXII).

G.B.’s answer to the same question was particularly insightful since he mentioned what others link to masculinity, such as strengths, dominance, roughness, sportiness, but clearly distanced himself from this view since it did not match his own personality. However, he also made it a point to highlight that, although he viewed himself as diverting from conventional understandings of hegemonic masculinity, he did not want to be associated with attributes linked to femininity:

Honestly, I have never really thought about this. Well, to me masculinity is somewhat a little more linked to a question mark than to an exclamation mark. Since I was -, you need to see the individual situation, so we were four boys at home, and I was the youngest, and I was, let’s say, not only by age but also by nature the most sensitive of the four. And the others were bigger, stronger and rougher, I was somewhat more highly sensitive, what then somehow was, yes, somehow perceived, by my social surroundings more than by me, I don’t want to say, to have a more feminine touch but it was not the kind of masculinity, let’s say, that was embodied by others. [...]. So I had a conception of what masculinity was but, let’s say, also some healthy doubts about how sustainable and also justified this was,

let's say, simply because of the discrepancy to my own feelings, to how I viewed myself (Bühring 2020, LXXVII).

Interestingly, although all four men mentioned different aspects of masculinity, they all more or less strongly stressed the differences between men and women which reflects a hegemonic cultural narrative grounded in biology and evolutionary theory (Fausto-Sterling 2008, 3–12). This also became obvious at other points during the interviews.

Burkard Rosenfeld said strikingly little about the specific characteristics of women only when I asked if in his view men or women suffer more by the ageing process, he said: “I think on average women suffer more by the physical signs of ageing, wrinkles, glasses, whatever,” (Bühring 2020, XLVIII). This view was also entertained and elaborated upon by my father, who in reply to the same question, said:

It is much more difficult for women...Yes, because I think that on the one hand, in a different age, they, at least in my view and I think are much more linked to their social environment in a specific way, well, integrated in their social environment, you could also say more dependent and therefore more dependent on the echo of their social surroundings than it is the case with men. And also since the appearance plays a crucial role and the echo naturally becomes less when one becomes a little older. That means they have with ... I think that is; they will have more difficulty in keeping their self-concept (Bühring 2020, CXXVIII).

Neither Günter Schotten nor G.B. agreed with this conception of women, particularly with reference to the women they know. Günter Schotten first said when I asked him whether ageing was more difficult for men or for women: “I have heard that it is more difficult for women,” (Bühring 2020, LXXIV). When I then probed for more detail by asking him if he thought that was true, he replied: “I don't know. I don't think so. It's not the case with my wife. She has as little a problem with getting older as I. You hear that regularly but in my circle of friends I cannot confirm that” (Bühring 2020, LXXIV).

Nonetheless, in other parts of the interview both G.B. and Günter Schotten emphasised the differences between men and women. In addition to mentioning the “male gene of performance orientation” (Bühning 2020, LIX), Günter Schotten’s view of the natural role division also became apparent when he talked about his wife’s professional occupation. He described to me that his wife used to have a lawyer’s office with a focus on divorce, inheritance, corporate and criminal law relating to young offenders, which was rather successful “...but small. Very small and it always took backstage. The children had always preference time-wise, and when there was something ...That is why it did not play such a big role for her,” (Bühning 2020, LX). And shortly after that, he remarked: “My wife worked much but, as said, always completely in the background, and only very little. In comparison to me, naturally very little,” (Bühning 2020, LX). I then asked: “And she took care of the children?” and Günter Schotten answered: “Exactly, that always had preference, which was appropriate. That is why she called herself a single mother,” (Bühning 2020, LX).

G.B. repeatedly mentioned his high respect for women and especially for his mother. For instance, he said: “Well, I have never met a woman who worked as much as my mother,” (Bühning 2020, LXXXI). When I enquired about the gender-specific handling of the ageing process, he even said: “...I also believe that women have much more inner balance...Within this context, I have always been somebody who said that women are the stronger sex,” (Bühning 2020, CVI). Nevertheless, as already mentioned above, it became clear in his definition of masculinity that regardless of his high respect for women, he did not want to be affiliated to female characteristics when he said: “...I don’t want to say, to have a more feminine touch, but it was not the kind of masculinity, let’s say, that was embodied by others” (Bühning 2020, LXXIX).

In my view, the above responses show that the interviewees have incorporated a conception of gender characteristics based on sexual difference into their identity construction, in which characteristics such as activity, performance orientation, being driven by ambition for professional success and the will for domination and winning are attributed to masculinity whilst female characteristics are generally linked to being

caring, being more balanced, being emotional and warm, being less interested in career progression but also to passivity and, to a much lesser degree, to dependence (Schippers 2007, 94–95).

The answers, however, do not indicate a general disrespect for women but simply show that women were perceived as a totally different species which has little in common with men. In fact, and despite what is suggested by some scholars (Connell, 2009; Kimmel, 2001; Schippers, 2007), Günter Schotten, Burkard Rosenfeld and G.B. did not appear to link feminine characteristics to negative connotations but instead seemed to, in different degrees, feel admiration for women and their way of handling life. Within this context, it is also particularly interesting that women who in some way display male characteristics were not, as Schippers (2007, 95) believes, categorised as unnatural or social pariahs. In fact, it neither seemed to be something which the interviewees viewed as unlikely nor did it seem to impede their appreciation or respect for these particular women.

Burkhard Rosenfeld said, when reflecting on the fact that his first wife had only found a satisfactory professional occupation rather late in her life, whilst his second wife had continuously worked part-time in a pharmacy during their relationship: “But after all, she³, she, after all, had additionally⁴ had a job, not full-time but part-time. That somewhat gave her strength, and that did not exist for my late wife,” (Bühring 2020, XXXV). At another point during the interview, Burkard Rosenfeld described his second wife as “... a little more curious than me,” (Bühring 2020, XLV). These remarks and the whole conversation left me with the impression that it was of particular significance for Burkard Rosenfeld to be on an eye-level with his wife, and that he believed that being equal partners in the relationship a prerequisite for a healthy relationship and a working marriage.

Similarly, Günter Schotten stressed that he and his wife were intellectually on the same level and that this markedly increased the quality of their lives, also in older age: “...And yes, my wife and me, we have well, ...

3 His second wife.

4 In addition to being a mother and housewife.

We also get on intellectually one hundred percent. We are nearly always of the same opinion. Also critical, very critical. We really are individualists somehow. But also, very critical about all and nothing and as such it⁵ has been quite good,” (Bühning 2020, LXIV). He also mentioned that he still had contact with two female colleagues who frequently contacted him to discuss legal issues. He clearly held these women in the highest respect and did not at any point indicate that he found it remarkable or inappropriate when women worked in the same profession as he used to do. Referring to one of these two women, he said: “...We are on an absolutely identical wavelength. When she has questions, they are always absolutely justified...” (Bühning 2020, LXII).

G. B. was, except in the instances already quoted above, a little less explicit about his opinion about women, who display characteristics and abilities traditionally linked to men. I, however, believe this was based on him not even questioning that women have the same and perhaps more abilities than men – an understanding which he transmitted throughout the interview (Bühning 2020, LXXIX-CXXXI). The implicitness with which he took the equality of men and women for granted is, I believe, the result of his upbringing on two counts. First of all, he is considerably younger than the other participants and therefore grew up in a time characterised by civil rights movements and feminism, which certainly influenced him and his views on gendered hierarchies (Baur and Luedtke 2008, 13–15; Brown 2013). At the same time, the admiration he felt for his mother, a woman who not only took care of her family and a household, but also helped his father considerably with the administration of the company, very early presented him with a female role model highly unusual for that time. His slightly different view on women became utterly clear to me when he, as the only participant, said quite casually: “That therefore means, everything which was family, what had to do with the children, was her job,” (Bühning 2020, XCVI)

At first sight, this might seem to be a rather conservative remark referring to the traditional role division between men and women, and partly this might be true, but to define taking care of the family and the

5 It = retirement, respectively the quality of life during retirement.

household as a job and thereby equating it with paid jobs, I find rather unusual.

Although my father, to my mind, provided the most conventional and rigid definition of masculinity, in which he somehow implicitly excluded the possibility of women having the same abilities as men, this was relativised in his answer to my follow-up question. When I inquired if he believed that the qualities he mentioned as being characteristic for men could also apply to women, he admitted that that was possible but not as likely as with men. Precisely, I asked whether his definition of masculinity was also based on a clear demarcation from women and my father answered: “Largely yes, absolutely. But, of course, I also know women to whom this demarcation only applies to, to a limited degree...” (Bühring 2020, CVIII).

Without a doubt and clearly not the least as a result of the historical context they grew up in, all interviewees understand masculinity by and large in contrast to femininity. They entertain a rather conventional view of the male-female role division, whose articulation is nowadays evaluated as politically incorrect which, however, does not mean that men regardless of age do not think similarly. Younger men and women might predominantly just not dare to utter this in public to avoid social sanctions (Bourdieu 2001, 5–53; Hall 2000, 36–53). Nonetheless, the interviewees’ views on gender relations and their own embodiment of masculinity are neither quite as black and white and inconsiderate, nor as unambiguous as it may seem at first sight. This became particularly obvious not only in the above comments on their conception of femininity, but also at other points during the interviews, namely when I asked the interviewees about what they thought their conception of masculinity was based on.

Günter Schotten and Burkard Rosenfeld attributed their understanding of gender roles explicitly to their specific situation during childhood and adolescence. Günter Schotten said:

I think that one is somehow influenced by one’s parents, grandparents, by what one experiences. I believe that. Also, by the traditional role model. That was much stronger than one can understand to-

day. ... Yes, my parents stayed together all their lives. And my father worked. He was a notary, too. And my mother took care of the children. She was very extramural, was involved in politics, was in the city council, in the unitary council, but in the end, the role division was absolutely there (Bühning 2020, LIV).

Burkard Rosenfeld elaborated on his view of the man being the provider and protector of the family, when I asked him about his priorities during his professional life:

I was influenced by my family background. ...So, she had, my mother had, with 29 the war ended, and with 32 she found out that she is a widow, and there she had two boys and had under great privations to bring up these children. That influenced me so that I wanted to become independent as soon as possible; I really wanted to earn my own living. And then could not only earn my own living but I could also together with my brother take care of my mother, who was a fantastic person. And that obviously influenced me ... I take care of the protection of my family. And my wife takes care of the family itself, of the warmth of the family...(Bühning 2020, XXXIII).

In his skepticism of the (hegemonic) conception of masculinity, G. B. expressed the idea that one's understanding of masculinity is primarily influenced by the specific individual situation. As such, I believe it to be justified to say that G.B.'s relatively contemporary and ambiguous perception of masculinity is the consequence of his younger age but also of what he saw exemplified by his brothers, by his parents and particularly by his relationship to his mother. When I asked him with whom he had a closer relationship, his father or his mother, he answered: "Clearly to my Mom. I was somehow her Benjamin⁶ ...I was very close to her, also later, even as an adult," (Bühning 2020, LXXX). Soon after he described the role division in his family:

6 'Benjamin' is a colloquial expression in German which indicates that someone is the youngest sibling and most spoiled child.

Well, my mother was the centre of the family. My father worked from morning till night...but still had the half hour to play football with his sons when he came home. But my mom was the soul of the family. She managed everything, did everything. She was there for everything and everybody.... a well-fortified woman. But nothing took priority over her family. And, well, I mean, what you might view in a different light as an adult when you look back, for her, the children came first and then there was nothing for a while, then came her husband and then came the rest of the family... (Bühring 2020, LXXX & LXXXI).

When I asked Lars Bühring if he thought his understanding of masculinity was influenced by his upbringing, he denied this possibility and said that the older he became, the more he made his decisions without consulting his parents or siblings. He then continued:

That's why this conception really formed itself slowly through this development and was not like this from the start. When I look at my mother, then this impression would largely be attributed to the fact that my mother was in some way very passive, but during the war, she incredibly determinedly guided the family's destiny. And with regards to my sisters, they then were in different degrees able to have their own activities ...[but] in the end in some way [they] subordinated themselves to the general standards, that means their respective husbands. Insofar I think that throughout the years it formed itself slowly and well, less during adolescence (Bühring 2020, CVIII & CIX).

Although all interviewees expressed their belief in a gendered role division, their relationship to their wives or female colleagues was not predominantly characterised by the hierarchical structure typical for ultra-conservative patriarchy dominant in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Colvin and Davies 2008, 113–30). Instead, it seemed to me that the participants often viewed women as equal partners, particularly when they displayed characteristics such as being active, rational and au-

onomous usually linked to masculinity whilst still fulfilling their role as mother and housewife.

Conclusion

The breadwinner model of masculinity is characterised by clearly divided gender roles, in which the woman stays at home and takes care of the children and the household, whilst the man provides for his family by performing a meaningful occupation in the public sphere (Gray 2000). All the participants in some way referred to this rather old-fashioned masculinity ideal popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Gardiner 2004, 115–81; Kessel 2003, 1–31). Simultaneously, the strong emphasis the interviewees placed on activity, performance, personal autonomy and rationality respectively control of oneself are vital aspects in the socio-cultural narratives of modern understandings of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2009, 237–52). This evidences that these standards have impacted the participants' identity construction throughout their working life and until now which could also explain the ambiguity I identified in their perception of women and their position in relation to men.

On the one hand, my research confirmed that the socio-cultural view which assigns attributes such as activity, rationality, determination and the will to succeed to men, and passivity, emotionality and a natural need and talent for being motherly and caring to women has in the past decades not changed significantly, despite the socio-cultural changes which have taken place. In fact, the view of naturally determined gender relations appears to form one of the most significant and stable markers of the masculine identity the interviewees constructed throughout their life-course. This might be due to its reference to biological predisposition, which is still at the core of many hegemonic narratives linked to masculinity and femininity (Bourdieu 2001, 94–108; Chambers 2005, 325–46; Negra, Tasker and McRobbie 2007; Tasker and Negra 2007, 1–26).

On the other hand, the participants' answers do not indicate a general disrespect for women but simply show that women were perceived

as a totally different species which has little in common with men. In fact, and despite what is suggested by some scholars (Schippers 2007, 85–102; Connell 2009, 237–52; Kimmel 2001, 21–37), at least, Günter Schotten, Burkard Rosenfeld and G.B. did not appear to link feminine characteristics to negative connotations but instead seemed to, in different degrees, feel admiration for women and their way of handling life. Within this context, it is also particularly interesting that women who in some way embodied attributes typically associated with masculinity were not viewed as unnatural, nor did it seem to impede the interviewee's appreciation or respect for these women.

This could be an outcome of the loosening of gender hierarchies as a result of civil rights movements and feminism in the 70s, but it certainly is also the outcome of the increasing influence of neoliberal meritocracy, in which outstanding achievement can override social marginalisation caused by gender, sexual orientation or race (Baur and Luedtke 2008, 7–30; Duggan 2002, 175–94). Thus, one could say that the participants utilised and combined masculinity conceptions, hegemonic at different times in their lives which are, however, all based on a binary construction of femininity and masculinity. This allowed the participants of this study to form a consistent and stable identity throughout their life-course expressed in their individual life-course narratives.

In current western industrialised countries, middle-aged and older men still, and despite all public claims of having reached gender equality, occupy a majority of key positions in politics, education, legal institutions and the media. Consequently, they continue the public privileging of men and masculinity. At the same time, through their roles as fathers, grandfathers, brothers, or mentors in the private sphere, middle-aged and older men play an influential role in the socialisation of younger generations. They therefore exert an enormous influence on the construction and reproduction of socio-cultural standards of acceptable gender performances and associated binary hierarchies (Bourdieu 2001, 94–108; Griffin 2005, 1–23).

Although my study has found that the interviewees incorporated a more flexible understanding of gendered hierarchies into their identity as older men, their identity construction is still primarily informed by

a binary construction of masculinity and femininity. Women were accepted as equals only when they fulfilled their apparently natural biological role as carers, while additionally displaying attributes linked to masculinity constructions such as being physically and mentally in control and active.

This understanding appears to reflect a general societal view in western cultural settings which, in my view, does little to support gender equality. As long as women are viewed as the weaker sex by biologically predisposition, – a predisposition they can only partially overcome by displaying additional male characteristics – gender hierarchies cannot be overcome. Thus, it is essential to not only continue to gain a better understanding of how women perform their gender roles, but it is as crucial to continue exploring male perspectives on gender, since this will allow for a better understanding of how both reproduce and challenge the construction of gender roles and gender hierarchies. This might, in turn, allow insights into the persistence of male privilege and, in the long run, enable changes to current patriarchal structures in western cultural settings.

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