

Editorial

Local Self-Governance and Weak Statehood: A Convincing Liaison?

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Abstract

This thematic issue addresses the relationship between local self-governance and the state. Self-governance is understood as the rules that emerge in the local social and spatial context. Local self-governance of individual local groups, actors, communities, and their social and institutional arrangements are considered. From this situated collective entanglement, the interactions and relations with state authorities are analysed in the various contributions embedded in local contexts of different world regions and based on empirical social science research containing mostly interdisciplinary approaches. The nine case studies of this thematic issue reflect a variety of statehoods (weak to restrained), diverse “intentionalities” of local self-governance (emancipatory and democratic, socio-economically, and socio-culturally oriented, security-driven or ecological), and their state-locality entanglements range between four forms of relationships: mutually supportive, conflictual, ambivalent, and avoiding.

Keywords

local self-governance; restrained statehood; self-organisation; state; weak statehood

Issue

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1. Introduction

The literature on weak statehood emphasizes that this concept corresponds more to the common concept of state across space and time than strong statehood, as the last currently exists largely only in countries of the OECD world. This statement is all the more true if one associates it with a normative understanding of the rule of law and the welfare state. Weak statehood is often associated with a deficit in the state’s functional performance. This diverts attention from the reasons why such forms of statehood find widespread acceptance.

This thematic issue addresses the research deficit on the relationship between self-governance and the state by focusing on the local and aims to contribute to the possible acceptance of weak statehood by raising the question of whether local self-governance and weak statehood constitute a convincing liaison. Our reflec-

tions are structured in four parts: Firstly, we clarify our understanding of the state and reflect upon it based on the findings on statehood in this thematic issue. Secondly, we define the concepts of local governance and self-organisation more precisely and unpack their varying forms. Thirdly, an analogous approach is taken to the analysis of the relationship between weak statehood and self-organised and self-governed actors. Lastly, we summarise the results regarding our guiding question on “convincing liaison.”

2. Weak State and Statehood

Following a Weberian perspective, we understand the state to be in control of the monopoly of the use of force, through which it makes its decisions binding within a certain territory. Coupled with this ideal type definition is the security function (internal and external) as well as

the systematisation of these decisions into a legal form (the Weberian concept of “legitimacy”; see Rothfuß et al., 2021, p. 77).

In addition to the monopoly of the use of force and the security function, the state provides further functional services in the area of material and socio-cultural foundations. It makes a normative claim to regulate its citizens and its territory. In short, the state monopolises the means of law, violence, and administration and claims legitimacy to defend its sovereignty within a given territory. The concept of statehood captures the state from a gradual perspective. Our focus refers to weak, or at least moderate, statehood in which we expect a higher significance of local orders than in contexts of strong statehood (Schlichte, 2018). The term weak statehood refers to the scope of state regulatory power. In contrast to a collapsed or failing state, a weak state is only partially functional but fundamentally stable, and its existence is not directly threatened. The limitations of state scope can be territorial, functional, and temporal.

The authority of the state to implement its decisions in its territory has required, in many post-colonial landscapes, the consent of or cooperation with societal organisations. The resultant state authority is usually portrayed as weak or weakened, particularly in post-colonial Africa, where strong customary authorities have evolved to bear “state-like” qualities and have sometimes been considered “rivals” to the state. The weak state often finds itself in a structural dilemma. On the one hand, it is often present in central areas of regulation, in the material and socio-cultural foundations as well as those of security. On the other hand, its capacity is too limited to assert itself against local actors in every conflict and its authority is not sufficient to always act as an arbitration body in disputes between them. In such constellations, the weak state must participate in the distribution and enforcement of struggles (Neubert, 2021).

Especially in the local sphere, the weak state is not the all-encompassing Leviathan but rather one actor among others, albeit a special and still particularly powerful one (Migdal, 1988). Thus, different representatives in different functional areas may act in an “uncoordinated” manner sometimes and may compete or even be in conflict with each other. At the same time, members of the elite act both as representatives of the state and as private individuals. This phenomenon can be summarised as clientelism, corruption, rent-seeking, and nepotism of neo-patrimonial states. In this context, the ruling elite may deliberately keep the state weak in order not to have to surrender too much power and resources to its formal institutions. From this perspective, individuals have shifting or overlapping roles combining private and state interests.

The term weak statehood used in this way resonates with a connotation of the incomplete, the deficient. However, there are other governance constellations in which the state’s will to regulate does not go further than its capacity or it even holds back a significant amount of

its capacity. An intentional weakness is not infrequently observed. Those in power value local self-regulation’s contribution to the resolution of problems. Such a state leaves room for substitutive and complementary regulations on the part of local groups. We propose for these situations the term “restrained statehood” (Pfeilschifter, 2022, p. 197).

Taking up the aspect of weak statehood, the present case studies characterise the weak or restrained state as indicative of regulatory gaps in specific policy areas but often also in the judiciary. Weak statehood is constituted independently of the regime, be it democratic or authoritarian. Furthermore, states are not homogeneous territorial entities; their strength and weakness vary from region to region and at different scales, such as municipalities, provinces, states, and national governments. This shows that the binary of a strong state versus a weak state must be overcome. The articles on this thematic issue take this as a starting point to either assume a strong state with weaknesses or a weak state with strengths.

That a strong and a weak state cannot be seen as binary concepts is argued by Hoogesteger et al. (2023) in their article on river commons and commoning struggles in Spain, Thailand, Ecuador, and Mozambique. They underline that it is not the spectrum between weak and strong statehood that should be considered but rather the relationship between the state and citizens, which needs to be understood based on mutual perception. Plaček et al. (2023) make a similar argument regarding Central Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). The binary of weak versus strong states does not offer a sufficiently comprehensive understanding as strong states reveal features of weak statehood. Yet the central state lacks the resources and capacities to consistently shape local spaces.

In her article on Vietnam, Kurfürst (2023) argues that the state is neither strong nor weak. On the one hand, Vietnam can be characterised as an authoritarian regime which controls civil society. On the other hand, there are regulatory gaps regarding the provision of infrastructure. Moreover, everyday life, particularly, those of street traders allows for an ignorance of rules, which shows that elements of weakness can be found in authoritarian states. In Mir’s (2023) case study on Kashmir, the state appears at the local and regional levels as a strong state that has a comprehensive monopoly on the use of force. Nevertheless, there are signs of weakness. On the one hand, this state has little legitimacy among the population and is, thus, dependent on the constant use and threat of violence. On the other hand, the practised function of violence is defused to a considerable extent by informal mechanisms of influence. However, this does not take the form of open resistance but rather the weakening of the violence’s effect. Due to the concentration of state activity on security, the state also has few resources left to fulfil other functions.

While some articles argue from the perspective of strong statehood and demonstrate weakness, others

argue from the perspective of weak statehood and show strengths. Daniel (2023) argues from the latter in the case study of South Africa. Here the state is accepted but shows gaps in the areas of housing because the constitutional right to housing is insufficiently implemented. The weakness of the state goes hand in hand with neoliberal policies and the continuation of apartheid's spatial segregation which exacerbates the housing crisis. The state's weakness offers a space for citizens to self-organise.

Other contributions point to the balancing of power between the state and self-organised actors, such as in Vietnam, Kashmir, and South Africa. Kestler's (2023) article on Argentina and Venezuela reveals that weak states also have corporatist capacity. Accordingly, the neighbourhood movement in Venezuela and the Argentine *piquetero* movement of unemployed urban workers show that the state cannot solve social problems but has the competencies of a rentier state. As the state is perceived as the principal avenue for attaining personal benefits or ensuring public security, civil society aspires to get access to its revenue.

Only some articles portray their cases of self-governance in an exclusively weak state. For instance, Arts et al. (2023) on forest management in Peru, Tanzania, and Ecuador argue that community management results from a state failure. They argue that the state's weakness offers a wide array of state–citizen relations around river commoning and the emergence of alliances. Weak statehood is also the starting point for Ubink and Almeida's (2023) case study on South Sudan. The authors argue that the existence of customary law is an expression of weak statehood. In this context of legal pluralism, which is particularly evident regarding land tenure, customary law is never unconditional, it always entails exceptions of interventions to align with the formal system and its norms. Both studies show that local structures complement the weak state in different ways. Zhllima et al. (2023) present a similar perspective on Kosovo and Albania. Even though these states are less weak than the case of South Sudan, they still reveal a limited democracy, weak institutional framework, and corruption. Moreover, informal practices, mainly active in land rights, such as the councils of elders, village headman, and customary law exist.

What becomes apparent is that the restrained state as a specific form of weak state is present, although the authors do not use this concept. Such elements of restrained statehood in which actors—be they citizens, civil society, or community-based forms of self-organisation—act in a complementary and subsidiary manner are evident in Albania, Kosovo, South Sudan, South Africa, Vietnam, Argentina, and Venezuela. Thus, restrained states are constituted independently of both the regime and whether the state is considered weak with elements of strong statehood or vice versa. At the same time, we observe “classic” weak states with structural deficits that are unable to adequately perform their

basic functions (such as Kashmir, South Sudan, Ecuador, Peru, and Tanzania). Both state types enable various forms of self-governance and self-organisation.

3. Local Self-Governance and Self-Organisation

When thinking about weak statehood, the concept of governance is more frequently used than self-organisation. The first concept offers a wide range of ways in which the exercise of power can be conceptualised. Thus, governing does not only take place through authoritative regulation by a hierarchical state, but also through “interaction and negotiation processes by the actors of the political-administrative system with economic stakeholders, associations, and civil society” (Pfeilschifter et al., 2020, pp. 12–13). Governance can thus be described as a change from a hierarchical, bureaucratic, and centralised authority to a self-governing, horizontal, and/or market-based form of regulation. Thus, it can be defined as arising out of a complex set of interactions between autonomous or semi-autonomous economic, social, and political actors with state actors who have different roles and interests (Sørensen & Torfing, 2007, p. 8). Even though governance as a concept was developed in the context of consolidated statehood, it can be applied to weak states (Krüger et al., 2023; Neubert et al., 2022).

Self-governance should not be understood as a form of political organisation at the municipal level or by political parties, but rather as situated rules that emerge in the societal and local context, in the village, neighbourhood, or city (Pfeilschifter et al., 2020). Beyond the level of the family, any group of actors or community develops collective rules that are intended to secure or facilitate its continued existence. In any case, local self-governance means that it is possible to set and implement one's own rules. The terms self-regulation or self-governance evoke the positively connoted idea of grassroots democratic structures. However, local self-governance can also follow other principles that are characterised by hierarchy or even the exclusion of certain groups and actors.

We define self-organisation as a process by which social relationships (that characterise loose networks) are institutionalised through the definition of mutual interests, positions and relations as well as values, norms, and moralities (Mayntz, 2006; Ostrom, 1990). Trust based on individual relationships is, thus, transformed into trust in the collective. This does not mean that there cannot be tensions between the individual and the collective in the process of self-organisation. Enhanced cooperation as “collective intentionality” or a “collective we” allows for differentiation and specialisation within the collective which strengthens the potential for developing key interests through “grassroots” action (Rothfuß & Korff, 2015). Moreover, a self-organised group can be challenged both in its internal organisation by internal conflicts (Daniel, 2021) and in its external relations by complex limitations with competing local groups.

Looking at the case studies, varying forms of self-organisation or different modes of self-governance at the local level become obvious. The locality can be anchored both in urban and rural areas. Some articles address self-organisation, while others focus more on the mode of self-governance. We would like to suggest that these forms of self-organisation and self-governance can be distinguished according to three analytical axes, which at the same time provide an understanding of the plurality of self-organisation and self-governance. The schematic representation (Table 1) clarifies essential starting points for the analytical differentiation of the cases, whereby the complexity of each case must be kept in mind.

The first axis distinguishes emancipatory forms of self-organisation, which are often accompanied by (grassroots) democratic governance, from preservative, stability-oriented, and traditional ones which are sometimes characterised by hierarchical or even authoritarian forms of regulation. Emancipatory forms of self-organisation assume an ability to shape the world, which potentially makes it possible to free oneself from structural inequality, discrimination, and marginalisation based on a critique of the status quo and the pursuit of the desirable. Supposed traditional forms of self-organisation are oriented towards the preservation of the status quo or even the return to an imagined status quo. Emancipatory forms of self-governance tend to be new forms of social formation, while supposed traditional forms draw on or seek to revive established social bonds. The stability-oriented actors tend to draw legitimacy from supposed tradition or morality, while the emancipatory groups draw it more from problem-solving competence or universal values.

Case studies from Kosovo, Albania, and South Sudan point to the importance of elders and village headmen (Kosovo and Albania) or clan structures and inter-family relations (South Sudan) for self-organisation in coping with social conflicts. These tradition-based forms of self-governance either fall back on family structures or existing communal areas of regulation, which are to be preserved. This is also the case regarding forest management in Peru, Tanzania, and Ecuador, which is based on

the ability of communities to manage forests in response to the weak and distant state. Self-governance in Kashmir is called *rasookh*, which is based on personal relationships of varying degrees of intensity according to kinship, friendship, or group memberships. Also, in the case of Vietnam preserving is in the foreground, although there is less recourse to an existing social structure in self-organisation than to customary forms of action (in this case trade), which are displaced by modern urbanity. Emancipatory forms of self-organisation react to a state regulatory gap and/or strive for increased political participation. We are witnessing this in Central Europe. The participatory budget meetings may consist of various civil society groups but also party members with the aim to enhance the voice of citizens in political decisions. Emancipatory forms of self-organisation and self-governance, which aim to overcome social problems, can also be found in Argentina with the emergence of the *piquetero* movement, in Venezuela with the neighbourhood movement, and in South Africa with the housing movement. Similar to forms of self-organisation in Thailand, Spain, Ecuador, and Mozambique that organise with “river commoning” to defend, protect, and restore the rivers.

The second axis of self-organisation and self-governance addresses the area. We, first, distinguish socio-political forms, including economic deprivation. Most of the self-organised actors in the case studies organise around specific socio-political or economic incentives, such as the increasing urban dislocation as gentrification (South Africa), modernisation (Vietnam), socio-economic marginalisation (Argentina, Venezuela), and the distribution of the local budget (Central Europe). However, self-organisation also addresses the increased participation rights of citizens in political decision-making, as the case studies on Kosovo and Albania illustrate. The second area of self-organisation is security. Regarding Kashmir, Mir argues that the self-organised actors are providers of security which the state cannot provide. Here, security is drawn from informal connections. A third area addresses nature and land as important collective resources (ecology). Ecologically based forms of

Table 1. Forms of self-organisation and self-governance.

Cases	Self-Organisation	Area	Scope
Central Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia)	Emancipatory	Socio-political	Group-related
South Africa	Emancipatory	Socio-political, security	Group-related
Argentina, Venezuela	Emancipatory	Socio-political	Group-related
Spain, Thailand, Ecuador, Mozambique	Emancipatory	Ecology	Community-related
Kashmir	Preservative	Security	Community-related
Vietnam	Preservative	Socio-political, economic	Group-related
South Sudan	Preservative	Socio-political	Community-related
Kosovo, Albania	Preservative	Socio-political	Community-related
Peru, Ecuador, Tanzania	Preservative	Ecology	Community-related

self-organisation and self-governance can be found with the idea of protecting nature and partly improving the relationship between the environment and people. These forms of self-organisation are present in the debate on forest management in Peru, Ecuador, and Tanzania as well as in the self-organisation for the protection of rivers in Thailand, Spain, Ecuador, and Mozambique. Some of the cases organise around different overlapping ambitions as in that addressing housing in South Africa as a political-economic form of self-organisation and security.

The third analytical axis of self-organisation or self-governance covers the scope of regulation, which either refers to a defined group or a less defined local community. In the latter cases, existing family, clan, or social structures are used to regulate, although they do not necessarily have to be preservationist as in the case study on river commoning. The case studies on South Africa, Argentina, Venezuela, and Vietnam show that self-organisation addresses the group of self-organised (the different movements in South Africa, Venezuela, and Argentina), the street vendors (Vietnam), or the defined group of citizens taking part in participatory budget forums (Central Europe). Even if self-organisation is group-related, it is important to consider that social movements go beyond, as they demand changes for parts of society or the transformation of society. As already emphasised, community-related forms of self-organisation or self-governance have a broader reach, address the local community *per se* and may be regulated by customary law, as in South Sudan, Albania, and Kosovo, or regulated by social ties such as kinship, friendship, or common group memberships (Kashmir). In the case of river commoning (Thailand, Spain, Ecuador, and Mozambique), it is primarily the affected community that organises itself against flooding or other natural disasters. The authors also point out that, regarding the ecological protection of the river, the formation of alliances is crucial to assert interests *vis-à-vis* the state.

If we look at the self-organisation and self-governance of the varying case studies in different world regions, the connection between the orientation (emancipatory versus preserving) and the scope (group versus community-based) is most striking because conservative forms of self-organisation have a greater reach than emancipatory forms, which are predominantly group-related. This is directly connected to the fact that emancipatory groups must first set up their structures and regulations, while conservative ones fall back on existing social structures and communal forms of regulation, thus, mostly on moral or tradition-based legitimisation, which in emancipatory groups have to be created through problem-solving capacities.

4. Relations Between Weak Statehood and Local Self-Governance and Self-Organisation

Lastly, we explore the relationship between the self-organised actors and the state. The relationship between

formal state and societal informal rules has been discussed for some time in the field of comparative politics (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Lauth, 2000, 2015). While most scholarly work focuses on the national level, our discussion is concerned with the local. For the relational analysis between self-organised actors and the state, it is important to consider the attitude and capacity of the last, because it has a certain inability to intervene or lacks the will to show its power. Additionally, the state can consciously and purposefully build relationships with existing self-organised groups. We have already differentiated between two forms of weak states (lack of resources and restrained state). Furthermore, regime characteristics should also be taken into account as it makes a difference in the cooperation to be examined, whether we observe these interactions in democratic or autocratic settings.

The previous explanations demonstrate that the analysis of the relationship between weak statehood and local self-organised actors is a complex task—as both are differentiated in many ways and the relationships between them can vary. In the relationship between statehood and local actors various constellations can be imagined *a priori* (Daniel, 2019; Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2021) which must be examined in individual cases. Looking at the relationship between local self-organisation and self-governance and the state in either urban or rural local areas, we distinguish between the kind of relationship and the permanence of self-governance, shaping the durability of the relationship to the state. The representation of the relationship between self-organised actors and the state goes beyond simplistic relations, such as cooperation versus conflict, and shows the multiplicity of relationships that can overlap in a case study. Accordingly, we identified four forms of relationships (Table 2): mutually supportive, conflictual, ambivalent, and avoiding.

A mutually supportive relationship between self-organised actors is based on a complementarity in which each actor perceives itself as a valuable addition to the other. This is based either on the state providing spaces for self-organised actors, thus legitimising them, or on the state tolerating spaces for self-organised actors, but only as long as it has some weakness or regulatory gaps. These two forms of mutual support are described as state-intended or unintended. These self-organised actors may improve state governance and its legitimacy but may also sideline it. This is the case regarding participatory budgeting in Central Europe, where space is given for citizens' participation with a substitutive understanding. The results are complementary to the official state measures. Even in South Sudan, Kosovo, and Albania, we are witnessing a mutual relationship between those self-organised communities using customary law and formal state law. Nevertheless, even if the relationship is predominantly mutually supportive, it can also show ambivalences or conflicts (e.g., while customary law excludes women from land tenure, the state postulates gender

Table 2. Relationship between self-organised actors and the state.

Cases	Complementary (intended)	Complementary (unintended)	Ambivalent	Conflictual	Avoiding	Cooptation/Control	Permanent
Central Europe	X						X
South Africa			X	X	X	X	
Venezuela, Argentina			X			X	
Spain, Thailand, Ecuador, Mozambique		X			X		
Kashmir			X				X
Vietnam		X					X
South Sudan	X			X			X
Kosovo, Albania	X						X
Peru, Ecuador, Tanzania		X		X			

equality). This shows that although self-organised actors are predominantly in complementarity with the state, an intersectional perspective unpacks that for women the situation is more ambivalent.

In addition, unintended relationships of mutual support between state and self-organised actors exist, such as in the case of traders in Vietnam, the forest management of communities in Peru, Tanzania, and Ecuador, or even the river commoning in Spain, Thailand, Ecuador, and Mozambique. Regarding Vietnam, Kurfürst argues that the relationship between the traders and the municipality is predominantly convincing due to a shared value system determined by both municipal and informal practices of community care. In this respect, the relationship between the traders and the municipality is not intended but tolerated, because the shared values of leadership lead to mutual recognition and legitimation.

The self-organisations for the community management of the forest in Peru, Tanzania, and Ecuador also act complementary to the state, though this relationship bears a potential conflict. Here, again, the recognition of the state contributes to the legitimation of actors. Regarding the river commoning in Spain, Thailand, Ecuador, and Mozambique, self-organised actors engage and create spaces for a mutual relationship to share, discuss, and disseminate ideas and proposals. However, regarding Mozambique, Hoogesteger et al. observe that self-governance also has a feature of avoidance. To consolidate local communities, actors avoid spaces of interaction with the state. These examples already demonstrate that self-organised actors, even if they act complementary to the state, can certainly carry a dimension of ambivalence, conflict, or avoidance.

In the other case studies, the relationship to the state is highly ambivalent and complementarity does not predominate. However, none of our case studies is

exclusively avoidant or even conflictual in its relation to the state. For instance, the relationship between the state and self-organised actors in Kashmir is ambivalent. The *rasookh* practices conflict with formal regulations and monitoring mechanisms, yet they are not used in a confrontational way, but in agreement with the state. In the end, however, they undermine the state's regulatory framework. This does not increase the legitimacy of the state but rather its acceptance since the hardships and violent measures can be reduced in this interaction. The relationship between social movements and the state is also ambivalent in Venezuela, Argentina, and South Africa. In the cases of Venezuela and Argentina, the author describes the relationship as an ambivalent one because the state successfully co-opts parts of the movements, leading from self-governance to clientelism, while others maintain their autonomy and reject state interference. The case of the housing movement in South Africa is ambivalent too: The movement acts complementarily to the state by offering shelter for those who are in need but also contests the state as it unpacks the limited problem-solving competencies, therewith delegitimising the state. In some cases, the movement's activists also try to avoid the state, while the last shows ambition to control the self-organised first and especially their occupation. The relationship between self-organised actors and the state can thus take on different forms and, as shown by the cases in this thematic issue, these connections are sometimes contradictory and simultaneous. In some cases, a permanent regulation emerges, which consolidates the relationship with the state. For instance, with regards to participatory budgeting in Central Europe or the customary law in South Sudan, Kosovo, or Albania, and also, partly, in Kashmir.

5. Conclusion

A closer look at the relationship between local self-organisation and self-governance and the state reveals a considerable variance. We have structured this complex arena through two types of state—restrained and weak—and three axes of local self-organisation related to local self-governance as well as several forms of interactions (mutually supportive, conflictual, ambivalent, and avoiding). The most important distinction that emerged was the separation between restrained and weak states, which has a strong effect on the respective connections between state actors and local groups. The scope of possible interactions and the related durability varies stronger in the groups of weak states than in the restrained states. Which forms of interaction dominate depends mainly on the contemplativeness or tension of the existing norms of state and local actors. An establishment of certain permanent forms of local governance can be observed when informal rules are relatively stable.

Elements of restrained statehood in which actors—be they citizens, civil society, or community-based forms of self-organisation—act in a complementary and subsidiary manner are evident in the cases of Central Europe, South Africa, Vietnam, Argentina, and Venezuela. Thus, restrained states are constituted independently of regime form and independently of whether the state is considered weak with elements of strong statehood or vice versa. Different local forms of self-organisation and self-governance arrangements can be observed. The case of South Africa, where a quite durable local governance structure has emerged, is interesting although it is often conflictual. As the conflicts are mutually dependent, since they serve to legitimise both sides vis-à-vis their supporters, they can ultimately be balanced out. Tensions also characterise relations in governance arrangements in Kashmir. Here, the major differences at the formal level are overcome through personal trust relationships. In a way, these stabilise the state's structures of violence and at the same time undermine them informally.

Overall, our analysis of the cases shows the possibility of a convincing liaison. In other deviating circumstances, however, we can observe constellations that can be assigned to the modes of conflict and avoidance. This finding highlights the importance of more systematic research on this topic to capture the respective relationships more precisely. We hope that the categories of inquiry we have introduced will help carry out such an ambitious undertaking.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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