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Towards a 'civic' narrative: British national identity and the transformation of the British National Party

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'Towards a 'civic' narrative: British National identity and the transformation of the BNP'

Abstract

This article examines the ways in which the BNP utilises the elements of British national identity in its discourse and argues that, during Griffin's leadership, the party has made a discursive choice to shift the emphasis from an ethnic to a civic narrative. Following a discussion on the transformation of the BNP and an analysis of the importance of nationalism in extreme right rhetoric, we put forward two hypotheses, 1: the modernisation of the discourse of extreme right parties in the British context is likely to be related to the adoption of a predominantly civic narrative and 2: in the context of British party competition the BNP is likely to converge towards UKIP, drawing upon elements of its perceived winning formula, i.e. a predominantly civic rhetoric of national identity. We proceed to empirically test our hypotheses by conducting a twofold comparison. First, we compare the BNP's discourse pre and post 1999 showing the BNP's progressive adoption of a civic narrative; and second the BNP's post-1999 discourse to that of UKIP in order to illustrate their similarities in terms of civic values.

Introduction

The result of the 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections points to a significant recent development in British politics. Notably, a rise in support for small parties more generally and for the extreme right British National Party (BNP) more specifically. This relative rise of the extreme right in Britain has been a particular feature of the local and EP electoral arenas, where the electoral system is more permissive of small party representation. In the 2009 EP elections, the BNP increased its support receiving for the first time since its establishment an impressive 6.2 percent of the votes cast nationwide and gained its first two seats in the EP. It has also experienced a rise in its local support, increasing its representation in the 2008 local elections in a number of councils around the country and securing a seat in the high profile London Assembly. National elections have also witnessed this trend, though to a much lesser extent. In the 2005 general election, the BNP more than tripled its vote share to 0.7 percent compared to the 2001 general election. In the more recent 2010 general election the BNP failed to achieve the success it had hoped for, not winning a single seat including Barking where the party and its leader had been extremely active. However they did increase their relative vote share by 1.2 percent which still entails a relative rise.

This article analyses this relative rise of the BNP by focusing on changes in its discourse. Building on the literature of the modernisation of the BNP and sharing the view that this modernization is linked to the party's attempt to construct a new master frame,[1] this article argues that the transformation of the BNP may be understood through the prism of nationalism. We offer an explanation that considers narratives of national identity as a determining factor in the transformation of the discourse of the BNP. More specifically we analyse the ways in which the BNP utilises the elements of British national identity in its rhetoric. The article argues that during Griffin's leadership, the BNP has made a discursive choice to shift the emphasis from ethnic to

civic elements of British national identity. Post 1999 the BNP has begun to filter the symbolic resources of the British nation from a predominantly civic prism. This process has been facilitated by an attempt to resemble the discourse of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), a non extreme right, however small and increasingly successful party on the fringes of the British political system, which similarly to the BNP places immigration at the core of its agenda.

In particular the article puts forward two main hypotheses, 1: the modernisation of the discourse of extreme right parties in the British context is likely to be related to the adoption of a predominantly civic narrative and 2: in the context of British party competition the BNP is likely to converge towards UKIP, drawing upon elements of its perceived winning formula, i.e. a predominantly civic rhetoric of national identity.

In order to illustrate the above argument, this article proceeds in three steps. First, we discuss the process of the transformation of the BNP and illustrate the importance of nationalism in extreme right rhetoric. Second, we examine the civic elements of British culture and the perceived linkages by the electorate between the BNP and UKIP. Third, we empirically test the hypotheses by conducting a twofold comparison. We commence by comparing the BNP's discourse pre and post 1999 as presented in their manifestos and proceed by outlining the similarities- in terms of civic values- between UKIP's and the BNP's discourse post 1999.

The role of nationalism in extreme right discourse

While the increasing significance of the BNP should be treated with caution, its rise is an important trend in British politics that deserves- and has been increasingly attracting- scholarly attention. [2] Though the rise of the extreme right is a cross-European phenomenon, it is particularly interesting in Britain because the latter often appears to be 'immune from' the infiltration of anti-immigrant right wing parties in mainstream politics due to either its constitutional arrangements and its restrictive electoral system or its liberal and inclusive political culture.

In order to understand the relative rise of the extreme right in Britain, scholars have focused on a number of factors, including sociological, economic and political. In particular, Eatwell focuses on the party's modernisation, including changes in its rhetoric, the abandonment of fascist ideals, less emphasis on violence, membership expansion and new propaganda techniques [3] such as the use of media sources and the establishment of the BNP's journal 'Identity'. While we agree with the view that the rise of the BNP can persuasively be seen through an examination of the party's own actions and strategies, it is our contention that the changing use of elements of national identity in its nationalist narrative is integral to the party's transformation.

National identity plays a prominent role in the extreme right parties' discursive toolkit. It refers to a set of unique features that only 'our' group possesses and therefore distinguishes 'us' from the 'other'. It has long been standard in the study of nations and national identities to classify these constructs according to two distinct types, most commonly labelled the 'civic' and the 'ethnic'.[4] The former emphasises historic territory, legal political community and a civic culture, and is thus a voluntary community. The latter places emphasis on a community of birth, descent and native culture and is therefore perceived as an organic entity.

Extreme right parties are by default exclusionary and hence customarily portray the nation as an organic entity in their rhetoric. They tend to focus on the linear progression of the nation through time and stress its homogeneity and continuity. This entity has fixed membership determined through an elaborate network of individual traits, assumed to be concomitants of nationality, and a simple but largely rigid set of identifiers. These identifiers are confined to elements such as bloodline, language, religion or community of birth, making the nation an exclusive club to which membership is restricted. There is a clear line of delineation between members and outsiders. The criteria for inclusion in the nation are ethnic whereby outsiders are excluded from the national community on the basis of race, creed and ethnicity. In other words, extreme right wing party discourse sets rigid national boundaries and stresses the primordial, ethnic and exclusive elements of the nation and its identity.

While the ethnic-civic typology can be useful as a system of classification, nations cannot be neatly sifted between those that belong to one category or to the other. Certain signifiers of national identity can be perceived both in voluntarist and organic terms, depending on how they are used by social actors.[5] Particularly in an age of international interconnectedness and European integration, the virtues and morals identified as core to the identities of democratic nations in general are not those of exclusivity and intolerance but rather, multicultural diversity, liberalism and toleration. These facts have increased the necessity for extreme right wing parties to annex liberal/civic values in their agenda in order to attain political legitimacy.

British political culture and the dynamics of party competition in the fringes of the party system

Civic elements, such as citizenship and respect for the laws, tend to prevail in British national identity. Because of its long standing liberal tradition, Britain is often included in the family of civic nations. With a long array of Enlightenment philosophers, including John Locke and John Stuart Mill, and a history of ideals such as individualism, secularism, a free market economy and the support of the private domain of the citizen against arbitrary power exercised by the state, Britain boasts a long standing tradition of liberalism. In its classical sense the latter entails strong support for the rule of law; pluralism, toleration and a notion of baseline equality of rights, protections and opportunity; a negative conception of freedom; and a free market economy with free trade.

Characterised by flexibility, British political institutions have evolved through time developing a model of liberal democracy that has not been ruptured by periods of violent revolution or dictatorship and authoritarian rule. British national political culture is based on tolerance and accommodation rather than radical social change. This lack of political violence enhances both a sentiment of superiority over continental neighbours such as France and Germany and contributes to the emergence of a democratic model characterised not only by liberal institutions but also a political culture with a long standing tradition of civil society. This flexibility is attributed to the principle of Parliamentary sovereignty -effective as a substitute to a codified and entrenched constitution- and the Westminster model of democracy. Pride in political institutions is a key element of Britishness. For example, among the respondents of the 2003 International Social Survey Programme series of questions, 82 percent responded that respecting British laws and institutions is important for being British.[6]

Cultural diversity 'and the need to cherish it as part of one's historical inheritance'[7] is a fundamental characteristic of British liberal democracy. As a principle that entails the interaction and peaceful co-existence of various cultures under one overarching state, it is inevitably intertwined with basic British liberal concepts such as pluralism, toleration, freedom of speech and acceptance of others. Paradoxically, multiculturalism can be traced back to the institutions of British imperialism, stressing a freedom loving providential form of Britishness set against the absolutism of the Continent.[8]

Liberalism, accommodation and multiculturalism are civic ideals that in theory directly contradict the extreme right principles. However, extreme right parties may utilise the liberal elements of national identity in their discourse thus altering the permeability of the boundaries of the nation. National membership becomes portrayed as less restricted to those who do not share the same race, creed or community of birth but rather to those who do not share 'our' liberal values such as democracy, multiculturalism and the rule of law. Individualistic liberalism is translated to the national level stressing the significance of the autonomy of the nation and its right to national self-determination. Hence extreme right wing parties may escape the flagship of 'racism' as they progressively associate themselves with civic ideals such as 'liberty' and 'emancipation'. Justification for inclusion becomes institutional rather than organic.

Traditional models of party competition expect mainstream parties to converge towards the median voter. Parties on the fringes of the system however appeal to a particular segment of the electorate. In the British context, the fringe parties of the right closest to one another are the BNP and UKIP. Seeing themselves as competitors in the right-wing authoritarian arena, the extreme right BNP and the non-extreme but anti-immigrant right UKIP operate in the same electoral arena, drawing from the same pool of voters. Electoral support for both parties appears to be correlated when they stand together. There are a number of perceived linkages by the electorate between the two parties, including placing priority on the immigration issue and a similar discourse on immigration and the loss of national identity.[9]

Parties are likely to draw on an existing winning formula from within their own political system. They have an incentive to draw on the identity resources of the nation which they address, especially in the context of an already existing winning formula. This article offers a nation-specific explanation arguing that in its task to construct political legitimacy, the BNP borrows a civic narrative from UKIP, a successful party in the fringes of the system which is not stigmatised.

The above framework yields two empirically testable hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: the modernisation of the discourse of extreme right parties in the British context is likely to be related to the adoption of a predominantly civic narrative.

Hypothesis 2: in the context of British party competition the BNP is likely to converge towards UKIP, drawing upon elements of its perceived winning formula, i.e. a predominantly civic rhetoric of national identity.

Based on the above two hypotheses, this article argues that the transformation of the discourse of the BNP is contingent upon a shift from a predominantly ethnic to a predominantly civic narrative. Framing the BNP's electoral appeal in a civic framework has been facilitated by the adoption of an existing successful civic narrative provided by UKIP.

The transformation of the BNP: a progressive adoption of a 'civic' narrative

In order to illustrate the progressive shift towards a civic discourse, this section conducts an in-depth qualitative analysis of party manifestos as documents that essentially define party political identity. Manifestos are uniquely authoritative statements of narratives that express the collective beliefs of the party as a whole and exemplify the way in which the party chooses to portray itself externally. We have purposely chosen to exclude internal documents from our analysis not because we deny in any way their significance but because we primarily focus on the way the party chooses to portray itself externally. We choose the employment of qualitative analysis of party manifestos since our prime interest is to explore both the way in which the party frames its discourse as a whole and the context in which words and phrases are used. We take 1999 to be the critical juncture of the transformation or 'modernization' of the BNP as it marks the beginning of the Griffin leadership and his significant reform agenda.

Our hypotheses testing henceforth is twofold. First, we analyze the BNP's nationalist narrative and the utilization of the resources of national identity in the party discourse pre and post 1999 in order to empirically test our first hypothesis. From the BNP's pre-1999 manifestos we identify three principal types of nationalism: racial, economic and imperial. We argue that in this period the racial type serves as a premise for the other two. A comparison with the post-1999 manifestos illustrates however that this is no longer the case. In addition, their concept of imperial nationalism has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from emphasis on unity via assimilation to emphasis on unity in diversity. Second, we compare the nationalist discourses of UKIP and the BNP in the post-1999 period illustrating their core similarities and BNP's policy convergence towards UKIP in order to empirically test our second hypothesis. We proceed by comparing their policies on immigration and European integration. Immigration is core of both parties' agenda and the European Union (EU) is part of this anti-immigration agenda, encompassing attitudes towards foreigners in a political system of free movement of people and labour.

Hypothesis 1: The BNP's discourse pre and post 1999

In the 1997 electoral manifesto, the BNP outlines the cornerstones of British nationalism as political sovereignty, ethnic identity, economic nationalism, and national unity.[10] This summarises their nationalist ideals within the 1982-1999 period. Focusing on their manifestos during this time, we have identified the BNP's nationalist narrative as based on three pillars: racial, economic and imperial. Their racial nationalism is the premise for the other two: 'our nationalism is ethnic as well as political- in fact it is ethnic *before* being political'.[11] Economic ties are based on race; immigration is refuted on the basis of race.

The BNP portrays Britain as an organic entity based on primordial ties between Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian and Celtic peoples. The prime bond is race and kinship: 'we recognise the ethnic kinship which exists between the indigenous people of the United Kingdom […] we believe it is important to preserve this kinship, and where possible, strengthen it'.[12] All their arguments derive from this racial understanding of the nation.

A notable example is immigration, which is perceived first and foremost a racial problem, a threat to 'the racial homogeneity and character of the British population'.[13] Immigration is presented as a holistic programme which should be altogether reversed; there is no distinction between skilled or unskilled, legal or illegal. The UK can not and should not exist as a multi-ethnic or multi-cultural entity and this is non-negotiable: 'Immigration of racially unassimilable peoples into this country must be completely ended and a massive programme of repatriation or resettlement of coloured immigrants and their offsprings must begin'.[14] Race therefore becomes a basis of discrimination and exclusion on racial grounds.

Their economic nationalism is based on a set of protectionist policies aiming to preserve the British economy from foreign competition and intervention. However, it is important to note that this economic argument seeking the nationalisation of British industry derives not from a class-based Marxist internationalist perspective, but from a nation-based argument, in which the core of the nation is race and primordialism. In other words racial nationalism is the fundamental principle of economic nationalism in the BNP's pre 1999 policy, illustrating the dominance of ethnic perspectives in their narrative.

Their emphasis on national unity illustrates the third pillar of the BNP's nationalist narrative, i.e. imperial nationalism. By this we refer to their intent to hold the UK together at all cost and to oppose separatist movements and all types of decentralisation, for example devolution and the partial autonomy of Scotland and Wales. They are also adamantly opposed to the increasing autonomy of Northern Ireland. Note that their policy on Northern Ireland and the IRA is identical throughout the period 1982-1997, despite significant developments which marked the relationship between Britain and Ireland at the time. Throughout this period, 'the real issue is race' and their policy proposals towards the various components of the UK is one of assimilation: 'Britain's ethnic identity based as it is on a mingling of English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish strains, must be preserved'.[15]

The BNP's post 1999 manifestos are characterised by a shift in this rhetoric. Although race still figures, it does so less prominently and it no longer forms the premise of their nationalist agenda which gradually and increasingly comprises of civic values such as liberal sovereignty and the rule of law. Their nationalism is portrayed as seeking to preserve the basis of civic values and 'to create and sustain social political structures in which individual freedom, equality before the Law, private property and popular participation in decision making is to some extent at least genetically pre-determined'.[16] These are all liberal values that the party had previously explicitly rejected as 'liberal sickness'.

Reference to ethnicity and race appears to be in decline. Civic political bonds, such as citizenship, which feature in the 2005 manifesto as the basis of inclusion, become

increasingly mentioned. A language of birth has been progressively overshadowed by a language of political rights such as 'the right to decide who shall enjoy citizenship and residence within its national borders.'[17] The premise is now economic nationalism increasingly governed by civic principles. This includes the rejection of immigration, now not solely on the basis of race but increasingly on the basis of its potential economic and social impact, such as unemployment, welfare dependency and educational failure. Immigration is refuted on the basis of the rule of law and the right for sovereignty. Holistic immigration is replaced by 'illegal immigration' which did not feature in their previous manifestos. Race appears but is neither prominent nor the premise of the BNP's post-1999 anti-immigration agenda: 'in any society claiming to be based on the Rule of Law, it must be beyond serious controversy that all illegal immigrants must be deported as soon as they are discovered. We will increase the funding and political will behind such operations by the police and the courts'.[18] Note the emphasis on the importance of political and judicial instruments.

A particularly interesting development is the disappearance of sections on the unity of the UK, what we have termed above as 'imperial nationalism' and their complete policy reversal on devolution. Devolution is now not only accepted, but accepted on the basis of a civic conception of nationalism in line with the democratic nationalist principle of subsidiarity. The BNP is now committed in preserving the devolved assemblies of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, making clear that 'returning to rule from one British parliament in Westminster is not an option'.[19] The party acknowledges the problems created by the West Lothian question and proposes to introduce not only a Parliament for England, thus extending devolution even further, but also creating a Pan-British Parliament as a civic overarching institution. Their model resembles more a federation or confederation 'of the British nations' (note the plural) rather than an assimilated union such as the one proposed during the 1980's and 1990's. Instead of assimilation, the BNP 2005 manifesto proposes unity in diversity, an implicit policy of multiculturalism which on the one hand would allow different ethnic communities a degree of cultural autonomy, for example the compulsory teaching of both the English and indigenous languages as well as the teaching of citizenship at school while at the same time proposing a central administration to deal with 'civic' issues, such as foreign policy and the economy.

Hypothesis 2: Comparing the BNP's nationalist narrative to that of UKIP

The premise of UKIP's nationalist narrative is economic prosperity and self determination. This underlines its opposition to the EU. The core of its nationalism, as put forward in its 2001 manifesto, is therefore predominantly civic: 'UKIP supports an inclusive concept of British nationality with common citizenship and shared values'.[20] UKIP's civic nationalist argument, that 'our nation' has the right to sovereignty and political independence holds that in order to be considered British, people need to accept British liberal values. The unity of the British nation is primarily based on political institutions including British common law, parliamentary sovereignty and individual freedom over state control.

This pursuit of the right to national self-determination implies a rigid opposition to immigration, a policy fundamental in UKIP's discourse, justified however on the basis of civic ideals. Its nationalist narrative does not include any reference to race and ethnicity, as the party claims to be resolutely opposed to racism. It is this

opposition to immigration that forms the core similarity with the BNP's agenda. Although we are in no way arguing that the BNP has abandoned all reference to race or that its discourse is identical to that of UKIP, we do hold that during the post-1999 period, it has progressively borrowed from the latter in an effort to frame its discourse in a civic manner.

One core area where the BNP borrows from UKIP is a language of political rights and the rule of law seeking to justify a nationalism based on the civic conception of freedom: 'we are the only party left that genuinely believes in freedom –freedom for the individual, freedom for businesses and local communities, freedom from patronising political correctness and from intolerance or injustice'. [21] Increasing references to 'freedom' in the BNP's post-1999 discourse illustrate its attempts to replicate UKIP's nationalist narrative, advocating among others freedom from the EU, from crime, from the oppression of the state, from unemployment, freedom of association and freedom of speech.[22] Freedom to decide the destiny of 'our' nation is gradually replacing earlier BNP justifications of nationalism premised on colour, blood and creed (see previous section).

The following section illustrates this gradual shift in the BNP's rhetoric to reflect that of UKIP's by examining two sets of policies, including immigration and European integration.

Immigration

Immigration is an issue of increasing political salience and core to both the BNP's and UKIP's agendas. Both parties are opposed to immigration. In its 2008 manifesto UKIP advocates freezing immigration and the deportation of illegal immigrants and those immigrants who commit crimes. A similar emphasis on illegal immigrants is a new trend in the BNP's discourse completely absent from its pre-1999 manifestos but forming the core of the reformulation of its strategy towards immigrants. It is also noteworthy that both parties pledge to keep the UK's responsibility towards asylum seekers and refugees with UKIP claiming to 'keep our proud tradition of helping genuine asylum seekers who fear for their lives'[23] and the BNP promising to 'abide by our obligations under the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees'.[24]

In UKIP's immigration agenda, the criteria for inclusion in the nation are predominantly economic. UKIP supports the deportation of illegal immigrants and the freezing of immigration on economic grounds, claiming that large waves of immigration hinder the performance of the British economy. It accepts the inclusion of certain numbers of immigrants so long as they are beneficial and make positive economic contributions. Currently, it is argued, immigration is not beneficial for the immigrants themselves as the economy cannot absorb them. A similar emphasis on the social and economic consequences of increased levels of immigration is increasingly characterising the BNP's discourse. While pre-1999, it is exclusively a racial nationalism that informs their anti-immigration agenda and all social and economic consequences are attributed to the racial problem, post 1999 the premise of opposition to immigration has increasingly become economic, in line with UKIP's approach. Effectively immigration is opposed for resulting in economic ills such as unemployment, welfare dependency, and educational failure.

European integration

EU integration is a particularly interesting policy area in terms of the rhetoric of the two parties in question. Through an examination into their discourse, two principal points may be discerned: (a) European integration is the main area where the BNP's discourse most resembles that of UKIP, and (b) this gradual adoption of civic terminology has coincided with the BNP's increased success in the 2009 European elections.

Both UKIP and the BNP reject European integration. They both argue that they stand against the EU as a political system but that they are not anti-European, thus making explicit that their Euroscepticism is not justified in ethnic or racial but rather in political and economic terms. UKIP's rejection of the EU is based on civic liberal ideals, including the right to national self-determination and the right of the nation to produce its own laws within its territory. The party claims that it is seeking to restore the right of authority from Brussels to Britain arguing in favour of Parliamentary Sovereignty. UKIP views the EU as a political project and not just as a loose trading arrangement which it would support. The EU political system is rejected on the basis that it is alien to the British political system and does not coincide with British values of governing both the society and the economy; this mismatch 'is bad for our economy, our self-respect and our prosperity'.[25]

EU opposition can be thought of as UKIP's main raison d'être and has also become increasingly prominent in the BNP's literature. European integration is the first issue discussed in the BNP's 2005 manifesto. Withdrawal from the EU has become the party's sine qua non arguing that only after this occurs and Britain is governed by Westminster, parties can realistically put forward policy proposals. This is justified through a language of political rights. 'The European Union is an aspiring super state which would deprive the British people of their right to democratic self-government; subject us to alien rule in the interest of a bureaucracy which has no loyalty to the United Kingdom'.[26] The BNP can be seen as influenced by UKIP and has attached a civic undertone in its anti-EU discourse arguing that the EU deprives the British from the right to self-government. The party uses the language of rights arguing that 'we should have the right to make our own laws, our own international trade agreements and our own economic policy, and control our borders.[27] Note that the discourse also contains some ethnic references as it criticises the EU as a threat to the 'homogeneity' of the British nation these have significantly declined and are no longer the premise of their nationalist discourse.

Conclusion

Paradoxically, 'democracy', 'freedom', 'liberty' and 'justice' feature prominently in the BNP's 2009 European manifesto. At first glance, such inclusive liberal democratic values appear by default contradictory to the ideals and principles of the extreme right. This article has highlighted this contradiction between liberal values and extreme right rhetoric on the one hand and has illustrated the way such ideals can become integral in extreme right nationalist narrative on the other. We have offered an account that links the transformation of the discourse of the BNP with the

progressive adoption of civic values in its nationalist narrative. The originality of this article lies in its analysis of the 'modernization' of the BNP through a nationalism and national identity perspective. It is precisely its ability to utilise the liberal inclusive elements of national identity that accounts for the transformation of the party during the past decade.

This process has been facilitated by a progressive borrowing from UKIP's nationalist narrative whose perceived winning formula expresses and justifies its policies in terms of liberal nationalist principles of the civic variety. We have examined the narrative of the BNP in terms of that of UKIP illustrating that despite belonging to a different ideological party family they may compared in terms of their operating on the fringes of the British party system, placing immigration at the core of their agenda and being perceived as competitors by the electorate. Following from this, this article has argued that in its task to construct political legitimacy, the BNP has been incentivised to draw on the civic identity resources already employed successfully in UKIP's rhetoric.

It is the ability of an extreme right party to alter the boundaries of the nation in its discourse that could compromise Britain's 'immunity' from extremism. This is certainly the case for the BNP since, as Copsey argues, it has recently become more inclusive in its rhetoric 'making it even more difficult to pin the 'fascist' or 'Nazi' label on the well-groomed bespoke suits of Britain's latest generation of neo-fascist extremists'.[28] Changes in a party's discursive toolkit however are not the only factor in determining electoral change. The 2010 general election serves as a reminder for this. Future research should go beyond examining the party itself into a wider analysis of the party system, the effects of institutional reforms and new electoral arenas, as well as sociological and economic factors.

Notes

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