



Disparity to Parity to Solidarity: Balancing the Scales of International Agricultural Policy for Justice and Viability

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Abstract

Resetting international agricultural governance requires a collective commitment to changing the economic rules of production. This article reports on the challenging questions raised by the Disparity to Parity project, led by a group of farmer-activists, farmer organizations, and scholar-activists in the US. How can parity policies be updated, expanded, redesigned with and for Black, Indigenous, immigrant, cooperative, female and gender diverse farmers and would-be farmers? How does the parity movement join in global solidarity to reset the international agricultural economic and trade rules to reverse the globalization of agriculture that dumps surplus and undermines food sovereignty?

Keywords Agriculture · Livelihoods · Agrarian crisis · Political economy · Technology treadmill · Debt · Farm justice · Indian farmer protests · Neoliberalism · Farmer suicides · Food sovereignty

Resetting power in global food governance requires attending to a fundamental aspect of food systems, food justice, and food sovereignty that was glaringly absent from the United Nations Food Systems Summit: agrarian viability, also called farm justice. The UNFSS entrenched the dominant trends of trying to solve food system problems through the global free market.¹ This approach enables price fluctuations for storable commodity crops and sets no limits on their production levels. Who benefits from these ecocidal treadmills of volatile prices and overproduction? Not the eaters, who get processed, low-nutrient, pesticide-laden foodstuffs. Not ecologies, which bear the brunt of toxins, pollution, emissions, dead zones, die-offs, and erosion. Not farmworkers who endure extreme oppressions.

But not even farmers benefit; importantly, they too are crushed by the cost-price squeeze and deadly debts intrinsic to the farce of free market-fundamentalism. It is the corporate input sellers, commodity buyers, mega-processors, and global supply chain distributors and grocers that profit mightily in their ability to purchase farm products at prices

far below parity in a speculative market. Farmers cannot escape the trap, because they are told (and sold) that technologies will help them boost yields and thus income. But boosted yields have only flooded markets, collapsed prices, and incurred debt and foreclosures. To even begin to understand much less address the drivers of global food system dysfunction, this agro-technology treadmill and subsequent externalized costs imposed on society needs to be centered (Kruzic et al. 2018). Resetting international agricultural governance requires a collective commitment to changing the economic rules so as to ensure fair prices for diverse growers and to ensure supply management for preventing ecocidal overproduction and a near-irreversible corporate capture of our food systems.

There is actually a robust, informative history of this governance direction in the United States. It's called 'parity,' which means a farmgate price floor that covers cost of production and affords a livelihood en 'par' with a base period of farmer viability. Parity, moreover, is an old 'innovation' with century-long roots in United States farm policy, serving as the original driver of the first U.S. Farm Bill in 1933 during the Great Depression. At its origin and core was the urgency of curbing overproduction and farmer bankruptcy. These policies of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his

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¹ As demonstrated and countered by the pre-Summit counter mobilization rally: <https://www.foodsystems4people.org/take-action-2/> accessed 29 September 2021.



Secretary of Agriculture, Henry A. Wallace were formed around the principles of a parity system with three pillars. First, a price floor for commodities was set through a non-recourse loan (meaning farmers wouldn't lose their land, only that year's harvest, in case of price collapse). Second, supply management in the form of a suite of programmes. This worked to match the supply to the demand and was set in place usually in a quota system. This management system also allowed for the conversion of crop land to pastures and other more ecologically-sound uses to prevent soil erosion and other adverse environmental impacts. Third, food reserves were created that guard against scarcity of food and, at the same time, set a price ceiling. This structure allowed small and medium-size diversified farms to cover the costs of production and stay in business—without the need for government subsidies or direct aid payments—and prevented the misallocation of resources (Naylor 2011). Often, agricultural cooperatives formed to advocate for these policies, and help implement them collectively.

But parity programmes—the original catalyst and twentieth century cornerstone of US farm policy—have been curtailed and largely forgotten over the past generations (Ritchie and Ristau 1986; Naylor 1986). Farm Bills began eroding parity policies mid-century, and by the neoliberal '90 s had ended and all but erased their memory (Graddy-Lovelace and Diamond 2017). Today, the central agricultural policy of the U.S. is encompassed in the omnibus 'Farm Bill', which gets re-negotiated and re-authorized every five years or so (Graddy-Lovelace et al. 2020). However, the political and economic influence of the corporate sector have turned recent Farm Bills into little more than ways to keep the entire system from collapsing, rather than ensuring the viability of farmers and farming communities (Wilson 2014).

Parity policies were far from perfect, however. White, male, large landholders accrued the majority of the structural benefits. Tenant farmers, many of them Black, suffered disproportionately when land idled to control production meant there was less land to sow; unlike white land-owning farmers, tenant farmers did not receive any compensation for non-productive land. However, some Black farmers and cooperatives were able to garner the guaranteed price and thus anchor themselves on the land with a cash crop commodity policy, against great economic odds and extreme racism arrayed against their survival. The premise of a farmgate price floor acknowledged the public good of agriculture (G. Naylor 2017; Graddy-Lovelace 2021): if farming livelihoods failed, multiplier fallouts, both economic and social, would ensue. A century later, this history serves as a powerful precedent for an agricultural system that could again value nourishing food over cheap commodities and that could use government power to constrain surplus so that farmers can earn a fair price and a dignified livelihood. In terms of food justice, such a system could also help ensure that families'

food dollars are going to support farmers who grow food rather than to food companies and agribusinesses in globally spanning supply chains who currently benefit from 'buying cheap' from farmers and 'selling dear' to consumers.

Over the past two years, a group of farmer-activists, farmer organizations, and scholar-activists in the US has been gathering together to pool our knowledge on farm policy, agrarian justice, and related issues. I, Garrett, was born and raised in a farming family and community in Kentucky, amidst vestiges of cooperative agriculture, supply management and price supports; I now research and teach agricultural policy from perspectives of agrarian studies, political ecology, critical geography, and decoloniality. Working with farm justice movement leaders, National Family Farm Coalition and member and ally organizations, I co-started the Disparity to Parity project in 2019. I, Patti, was born and raised on a diversified family farm in Iowa. After earning a teaching degree in Home Economics, I left Iowa, gaining new experiences while living in other states and in Europe, before returning to Iowa in 2010. I now farm alongside my husband, who has been a farm justice activist for over 40 years. We have successfully transitioned our farm to organic production. Each of us in the Disparity to Parity project are learning from each other and from farm justice movement elders, who carry generations of movement experience and valuable knowledge (Naylor 1986; Wilson 2014), so as to converge original writings and analysis. We have launched these writings and multimedia videos on a new website.² We have also synthesized and presented histories of parity to public audiences in a year-long webinar series.

In the course of this work, we have answered numerous questions and asked even more. Here are some of the overarching challenges which we invite policymakers, scientists, farming communities, and wider audiences to explore. How could parity supply management and food reserve programmes be updated to help coordinate regional, local, and direct supply chains to ensure a more resilient, adaptive agri-food system? When disruptions such as the pandemic occur, shocks and bottlenecks choke a hyper-centralized, inflexible supply chain. Small- and medium-scale farmers—particularly those of color—typically bear the brunt of these upheavals. How could existing Farm Bill programmes be expanded or reformed to support fair farmgate prices for farmers connected to regional, adaptive, direct markets and decentralized supply chains? How could parity policies be updated, expanded, redesigned with and for Black, Indigenous, immigrant, cooperative, female and gender diverse farmers and would-be farmers? How do we join in global solidarity to reset the international agricultural economic and trade rules to reverse the globalization of agriculture

² <https://disparitytoparity.org>



that dumps surplus (Murphy and Hansen-Kuhn 2019) and undermines food sovereignty?

International Solidarity

Just as our Updating Parity collaboration got going, the largest peaceful protest in recorded history erupted in India to contest the severing of Minimum Support Prices (MSP) and secure markets for farmers. Tens of millions of people have joined forces in an improbable rebuttal to the neoliberal move by the government of Indian Prime Minister Modi to slash MSP and succumb to agro-corporate capture of markets, food systems, and ultimately land across India. The Disparity to Parity project stands in solidarity with the brave Indian Farmer Protests—which have become a sort of revolution. Working with leaders and key analysts of the Indian Farmer Uprisings, the Disparity to Parity project has hosted webinars and commissioned multimedia content to explore and explain how this uprising serves as a potential, pivotal tipping point in international agricultural policy paradigms at large.

In short, the question of agrarian viability and farm justice is multiscalar—it necessitates national level governance commitment, but also international solidarity and negotiation and paradigm shifts. Arguably, the UNFSS would have been the place for farmer organizations around the world to come together to converge on questions of fair trade, fair prices, and collective struggles. Yet, the UNFSS Action Track 4 on Agricultural Livelihoods failed to acknowledge why and how farming is not a viable living. It repeated the neoliberal rhetoric that more technology and capital-intensive inputs would somehow result in higher incomes and rural well-being. Often, the United States is used as a success case in this global conversation on international agricultural development. Yet, even in the United States, *especially* in the US, as explained below—ramping up production has long depressed farmgate prices. Equitable agri-food livelihoods will require much more than merely integrating small-, medium-scale, and diverse growers into existing neoliberal global supply chains and markets, which propel farmgate prices in a race to the bottom; it necessitates interrogating this dominant neoliberal paradigm altogether.

Our project and this essay focus on the U.S. history of parity and disparity not as American exceptionalism, which we contest heartily. Rather, we look at the arc of U.S. policy's embrace and subsequent derailment of agriculture parity governance because it reveals the active making of what we now take for granted: a free market-based, extractive, surplus driven food system. This story, then, also serves as

a warning for farmers, communities, and policymakers the world over.³

Corn Belt Crises

I, Patti, grew up on an Iowa farm that my grandfather bought during the Great Depression. As a farmer who cared deeply for the land, he followed the philosophy that he wouldn't sell anything off our farm with its gently rolling hills unless it could walk off. That is, he only sold meat, milk, and eggs. The portions of our farm that produced grains and hay, or were in permanent pasture, nourished the animals. In turn, the animal manure provided nutrients for the land in a closed-loop system, very similar to what we now refer to as agroecology. The agriculture policies of parity price supports enacted during the Roosevelt administration gave hope to farmers like my grandfather that their efforts and hard work would be recognized as a common good to society for generations to come.

This family farm was only possible after Indigenous Peoples were brutally, horrifically forced from this land of woods and prairies while the labour of enslaved Africans brought to this country made the Southern plantation system possible. This history cannot be denied. In fact, this truth must inform us of the injustices and inequalities of the settler colonial, imperialist system that our country was founded on and that still influences our agricultural and economic policies. The scale and breadth of the devastating impact on people and the environment from that time period is nearly inconceivable. Although the devastation is not to the same intensity, what has happened in Iowa in the decades since the political and agribusiness interests began the elimination of parity in 1953 needs to be recognized as the results of a free market, corporate-dominated agriculture model, one that is accelerating in pace and may soon reach to every corner of the world. Without the policies of price supports, supply management, and food reserves that benefit farmers, communities, and the environment, the next wave of colonization will be through the corporate capture of global food governance, the new technologies that promise to solve very problems this system creates, and the spread of industrial agriculture's monocrops replacing traditional food producing systems.

As parity was eroded, Iowa, in the middle of the United States' Corn Belt, went from a mostly rural state with a strong economy based on family farms, close-knit

³ <https://civileats.com/2021/03/01/op-ed-what-the-farmers-revolution-in-india-says-about-big-ag-in-the-us-and-worldwide/>; also see webinar at American University, 2 June (soon to be posted on: <https://disparitytoparity.org>).



communities, and small businesses to a state dominated politically and economically by industrial agriculture which needs far fewer farmers to implement and that relies on genetically engineered seeds, synthetic fertilizers, and toxic chemical pesticides. Most livestock are owned by corporations, not farmers, and are housed in crowded Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) and feedlots.

Feeding Feedlots

The most detrimental outcome of an agriculture system—a world without parity—is the concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO) system that relies on an abundant supply of corn and soybean feed. Parity policies determine what a farmer is paid for the product, but also greatly influences how that product is produced and how it is used. In contrast, when prices are determined by a global free market, corporations are able to purchase raw materials, including agriculture products, at the lowest prices they can find. This misallocation of resources and the logic of our economic system that most of society takes for granted has led to the destructive agriculture we have today. With about eight hogs for every one Iowa resident, this intensive, rather than extensive, corn-soybean-CAFO paradigm now dominates Iowa. In this system, wealth is extracted from nature and from human labour.

The results? The water that Iowans depend on for drinking and recreating is dangerously polluted by farm run-off.⁴ Toxic pesticides are sprayed on approximately 23 million acres of cropland,⁵ polluting the air, soil, and water. Pesticides that drift off target, often going unreported, damage neighbouring fields, gardens, orchards, and people's health. The CAFO system packs thousands of animals together creating animal welfare concerns, antibiotic resistant pathogens, and toxic air emissions. Workers in these CAFOs and in the meat packing plants, whose workplaces became virus transmission hotspots during the COVID-19 pandemic, regularly endure poor working conditions with low pay. Furthermore, fewer farmers now manage many more acres of land. With far fewer farm families in rural counties, small towns and their schools, hospitals, and businesses have been decimated. Land that had brought some diversity to the landscape, including pasture, fencerows, and homesteads, has been turned into more acres of corn and soybeans. Biodiversity is greatly reduced and pollinators are in steep decline.

⁴ <https://iowacapitaldispatch.com/2020/08/26/des-moines-river-essentially-unusable-for-drinking-water-due-to-algae-toxins/> accessed 29 September 2021.

⁵ <https://www.agrinews-pubs.com/business/2021/07/11/illinois-iowa-add-soybean-acres-indiana-unchanged/> accessed 29 September 2021.

To transform our food system and reset the power structures and break the grip of corporate political and economic domination, we must re-envision and re-establish the principles of a parity system.

What Consolidation Crushes

When Iowans become frustrated with the environmental and social harms they see, the blame is most often directed at Iowa's farmers and their farming practices. Yet, the perspective of commodity farmers who have invested everything into growing corn and soybeans hoping to rise above their uncertain future, is important to understand if we truly want to transform this failed system.

Once locked into the corn-soybean treadmill, it is nearly impossible for individual farmers to exit that system. Instead, they invest in bigger machinery, the latest technology, and more land (rented or owned). With price uncertainty, the only way a farmer can take the financial risk to implement ecologically-sound practices, grow another crop, or have livestock is through incentives that pay for few selective practices: soil health, carbon sequestration, ill-defined regenerative or climate smart agriculture. As another way for corporations to greenwash their brand, these incentives have limited impact and do nothing to change the economic and political system that controls farmer decision-making.

Iowa's farmers are, in fact, doing exactly what the system expects of them. When prices for corn and soybeans are low, they must produce as much as possible. When prices are (relatively) high, they again produce as much as possible to have a financial cushion for when prices inevitably fall. With more years of low prices, and high prices still far below a parity price, fewer and fewer farmers are able to survive financially. The progression of the agriculture industry with no limits to growth is, in fact, the natural outcome of this capitalist economy. Some farmers and some businesses will grow, gobbling up other farms and businesses along the way. Eventually, we will no longer have farmers. Instead, this consolidation will result in food production being managed from afar with employees and robots on our precious land. We must fight the myth that this progression is inevitable. As the parity policies of Franklin Delano Roosevelt showed, we can change the economic rules. Otherwise, farming as the common good that my grandparents experienced will be just a quaint relic of the past.

This future of farming without farmers is not hard to imagine with technology accelerating the pace of corporate control of agriculture and food systems. As the chief executive of our local farmer-owned cooperative said at a member meeting, a farmer's data may soon be more valuable than the crop produced. Farmer knowledge, standing on the shoulders of ancestors, will no longer be in our collective memory.



Artificial intelligence will determine what is produced, where, and by whom. The foods we eat, with their cultural, social, and health connections, and the natural environment of the sun, soil, water, and air that nourishes us all, will be corrupted and captured to feed corporate profits.

A Senegalese farmer who had experienced the destructive impacts of industrial agriculture and embraced agroecology gave this advice during civil society's counter mobilization against the pre-Summit in July 2021: 'First, we need to ask the land for forgiveness'. Then, we must take action.

Supply Management and Coordination

The COVID-19 pandemic lays bare many longstanding vulnerabilities in the US food and agricultural system—chief among them precarious supply chains. Supply chains for produce, dairy, meat, milled flour, and other staple products have faltered—with bottlenecks choking the flows of food from fields to markets to meals. This led to contradictory outcomes: farmers destroyed millions of crops and animals, while nearly 1 out of 5 households with children reported food insecurity (Parekh et al. 2021). Meanwhile, workers all along those supply chains have suffered enormously from losing their jobs or even their lives. Even with crucial increases in supplemental food and nutritional assistance from the federal government, food insecurity remains prevalent, alongside eviction and unemployment. Ironically, this insecurity correlates with a massive oversupply of commodity crops.

Highly centralized and long supply chains are all the more vulnerable to public health and climate disaster disruptions, as well as labour and transport shortages. This poses food access risks for eaters and can cause financial catastrophe for farmers. For small-, medium-scale, farmers of color, and beginner farmers, the situation is even worse. What would a more resilient, adaptive set of agri-food supply chains look like in the United States? The Disparity to Parity project brings together a team of practitioner-experts, movement leaders, and interdisciplinary researchers to ask and answer this pressing question, and to analyze the economic and ecological injustices of highly concentrated, consolidated, and centralized global supply chains. The team includes agricultural economists who have been researching Market Driven Inventory Systems (Ray et al. 2002) and other means of updating supply coordination for parity (Schaffer and Ray 2020). The team also includes farm justice activists working with Congressional members to convey the importance of parity histories, updates, and futures (Naylor 2015, P. Naylor 2017; Naylor 2019; Sanders 2019).

Even as interest grows in U.S. parity histories and futures, international pressures discourage the use of price floors and market management. The World Trade Organization (WTO)

began with the intention of preventing 'export subsidies' and their deleterious impacts of commodity crop 'dumping.' Yet, WTO economists have conflated domestic price supports with subsidized exports — which are all vilified as 'protectionist.' In so doing, WTO rules criminalize parity programmes at large, leaving farmers around the world in a self-defeating race to the bottom of farmgate prices (Clapp 2017); this has deleterious impacts on rural well-being around the world, according to the past four United Nations Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food (Fakhri 2020). Even U.S. farmers, the alleged 'winners' of the globalized and liberalized trade system, have suffered greatly and dwindled in their numbers. Tremendous inequalities pervade the farming population. The largest landowners can garner direct payment checks from the US Department of Agriculture, yet the actual net income from farming averages below zero, meaning that most farmers struggle to make a living. For this reason, the experiences of a family-scale farm in Iowa pose a significant warning for the world.

Racial Justice

Diversifying markets and supply chains calls for diversifying the people and communities making a living from farming. Our project features examples of how racial justice must be at the core of bringing parity back to agriculture. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF) is a non-profit alliance of Black farming cooperatives across the U.S. South. Born in the Civil Rights era, the Federation advances economic and land justice and advocacy, against steep political odds, racism, and classism. Executive Director Cornelius Blanding recounts the long-time FSC/LAF director Ralph Paige's leadership in the farm justice movement and his advocacy for fair prices for Black farmers.⁶ He also makes the crucial point that Black and other farmers of color haven't had the land base to even prioritize parity or pricing in their political and social organizing. Another foundational piece on the Disparity to Parity website is FSC/LAF leader and renowned elder farmer Ben Burkett's account,⁷ which recalls how Black farmers made use of the cotton commodity programme but still suffered the racism of its problematic implementation.

A 2021 *Civil Eats* article asks the question: 'Could Price Parity, Supply Management Change the Game for BIPOC Farmers?'⁸ Accordingly, a chief goal of the Disparity to

⁶ <https://disparitytoparity.org/secure-land-tenure-first-step-toward-racial-justice-agricultural-parity/> accessed 29 September 2021.

⁷ <https://disparitytoparity.org/parity-and-supply-management-though-a-racial-equity-lens/> accessed 29 September 2021.

⁸ <https://civileats.com/2021/04/14/could-fair-prices-supply-manag>



Parity project is to research and negotiate how parity programmes in the US could be revived—and yet re-designed—to ensure racial equity, particularly for Black farmers and cooperatives.

Antiracist agricultural policy also necessitates the ending of racist farm labour exploitation. The history of parity programmes shows white supremacist hegemonies at work in US farm policy that prevented commodity support for Black tenant farmers and sharecroppers, and that excluded Black and immigrant farmworkers from labour protections. Updating and redesigning price supports as well as supply management policies requires ensuring fair living wages and conditions for those doing the work of farming in the fields.

Even more fundamentally, focusing on parity begs the question of how and why farmworkers (who are farmers without land) are not able to farm their own lands in their home countries and are forced to migrate to find better economic opportunities. Many farmworkers in the US hail from Mexican agricultural communities that suffered devastating price drops after the NAFTA treaty of 1994 enabled the dumping in Mexico of U.S. corn exports below the cost of production.

Disparity to Parity to Solidarity

The Disparity to Parity to Solidarity collaboration is diving deep into the key, overlooked role of farmgate price floors and Minimum Support Prices. These price thresholds are set to cover the cost of production for growers, enabling them to produce nourishing foods sustainably. We are also deepening our study of supply management programmes such as cooperatives, quotas, and reserves. This whole realm of governance was largely unmentioned in the UNFSS dialogues and was undermined by the Summit's fixation on capital-intensive, high-input cycles of ongoing overproduction fueled by prices below the costs of production. Instead, we saw near-total deference to private industry giants and corporate philanthropy empires.

Even amidst a robust counter-mobilization and wide array of prominent criticisms and outright boycotts, the UNFSS moved from Pre-Summit Action Tracks to Solution Clusters and National Pathways. Action Track #4 Advancing Equitable Livelihoods culminated in Action Area 4.1 Rebalancing Agency within Food Systems.⁹ Amidst important attention to farmworker livelihoods was a lack of attention to what

causes small-scale farmers to lose their land and migrate as farmworkers. The Action Track foregrounds land tenure equity and fairer access to credit but leaves unmentioned the dire political-economic pressures that have for decades crushed farmers with debt and land loss—i.e., corporate agri-food firms who raise input costs and drive down farmgate prices without impunity. Rather, 'rebalancing agency' here means Farmer Business School Approach, which supports smallholder farmers 'to cope' with 'globalization, economic liberalization, structural adjustments, decreasing role of the state in managing national economy and consequent difficulties for farmers to enter formal markets...[and] Volatility in the supply of basic food'.¹⁰ In short, the Agricultural Livelihoods resulted in Solution Clusters for integrating small and medium scale farmers even more within global supply chains dominated by massive agro-industrial firms. Rather than regulate the private sector's tendency to buy foods low from farmers and sell inputs high to them, this Coalition invited agro-industry to be 'champions' of this issue through investments that seek to profit off farmer subservience to global prices and their secular decline.

Meanwhile, Action Track #3 on 'Nature-Positive' agri-food systems produced a Solution Cluster on 'Repurposing Public Support to Food & Agriculture: A Just Rural Transition to Sustainable Food Systems.' But this promising title hid recommendations for World Bank-led working groups to 'eliminate agricultural subsidies' altogether and to 'deploy public finance effectively and policy reform (including that which mobilises private investment and public-private partnerships) to incentivise farmers in sustainable ways' (UNFSS 2021: 7).

The improbable global, grassroots rebuttal to the UNFSS disrupted the neoliberal agri-business dominant paradigm in powerful ways. The Indian Farmers Uprising, which has endured COVID and state repression for over a year to become the longest and largest peaceful protest in recorded history, heralds an extraordinary moment in international agricultural policy. India's farmers lay bare seemingly intractable power disparities, and in so doing, offer historic opportunities to re-set global agri-food governance policies and paradigms altogether. Only by connecting the realities of farmers in Iowa and in India with the many social movements fighting for food sovereignty worldwide can we envision a pathway toward a transformation of our food systems and put an end to industrial agriculture's destruction. Moving from disparity to parity requires intercultural, transnational dialogue, mutual learning, and solidarity, which are all underway and growing with energy and renewed commitment.

Footnote 8 (continued)

[ement-change-the-game-for-bipoc-farmers/](#) accessed 29 September 2021.

⁹ <https://foodsystems.community/action-area-4-1/> accessed 9 October 2021.

¹⁰ <file:///Users/graddy/Downloads/S.14-Empowering-Smallholders-as-Informed-Market-Players-Farm-Business-School-Approach.pdf>.



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