

From local to global cultural commons? A theoretical and empirical assessment

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Abstract

This paper provides both a theoretical and empirical inquiry into the process of identification and selection of cultural commons. Using data on Unesco World Heritage Tentative Lists - which are inventories of properties which each State Party intends to consider for nomination in the World Heritage List- we found that the number of total sites inscribed in the Tentative List by each country is positively affected by the total sites previously inscribed in the World Heritage List and the number of mandates in the World Heritage Committee. Our results suggest that the process of site selection follows from strategic considerations and this casts some doubts on the capacity of central governments in ensuring identification and development of common heritage (rooted in a physical space and defined by the associated culture and community) on the international arena, where the real players are the nations, as official Unesco members. We conclude suggesting that the shift from a local to a global dimension is not straightforward for tangible cultural as well as natural heritage albeit endowed with 'outstanding universal value'.

Keywords

Cultural commons; global public goods; merit goods; world heritage

INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that culture has a strong local characterization. Literature underlines that heritage is rooted in a domestic representation of symbolic foundations: Macdonald (2006, p. 11) identifies heritage as a ‘material testimony of identity’. The concept of cultural commons involves the understanding of the role exerted by the identity and symbolic dimensions of each community (as a source of trust and reciprocity, Ostrom 1990) in shaping cultures and cultural production.

However, identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage is also a global issue with institutions like Unesco encouraging States Parties to submit in their Tentative Lists ‘properties which they consider to be cultural and/or natural heritage of outstanding universal value and therefore suitable for inscription on the World Heritage List’ (<http://whc.unesco.org>). On our opinion, the shift from local heritage - representing values of a community - to world heritage - expressing values of an identifiable universal community - does not appear straightforward. Attributing a global value to national cultural goods both spatial and timely defined - being produced in local contexts - is still a challenging issue. Moreover, if it is clearly and widely accepted the idea of cultural commons in the case of intangible good, it appears even more difficult to identify cases of physical cultural commons, especially in a global context.

In the first part we analyze and discuss the categorization of cultural goods in the light of the ongoing literature, mostly with reference to the idea of cultural commons. In particular, we discuss the possible characterization of Unesco World Heritage as an example of global cultural common.

In the second part we search for the determinants of sites submission in the Unesco World Heritage Tentative List which are repositories of cultural as well as natural heritage positively valued by each country for a future possible inclusion in the World Heritage List. We demonstrate that the choice concerning the inscription of sites in these lists follows from strategic decisions of Unesco State Parties in a club-like framework. As the process of site inscription in the Tentative Lists seems to be strategically driven by central governments of countries, we conclude emphasizing that a better management strategies for universal heritage will necessarily imply a further discussion on how to balance local, national and supranational needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

‘Cultural commons’ refer to the ‘common theory’, introduced by Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom 1990), which inquires into the processes of production and self-government of communities sharing a *Common-Pool-Resource*. It is widely accepted that commons refer to resources shared by a group of people (Hess and Ostrom 2000), which are characterized by the features of non-excludability and subtractability and are concerned by a social dilemma in its use (Ostrom et al 1994). While in a first period studies were focused on natural resources, since the ‘90s scholars started to categorise new kinds of resources as commons. As a result a new area of research emerged centred on the New commons (Hess 2008) which includes, among others, cultural and knowledge commons. Madison et al. define ‘constructed commons’ in a cultural environment, investigating new modes of governance of cultural and scientific knowledge and information (Madison et al 2008). Their interest is addressed to cultural production, such as intellectual property pools, open source software, Wikipedia and the Associated press. They propose a framework for the governance of information and knowledge resources using instruments of the theory of the commons, particularly IAD. From another perspective, scholars conceive cultural commons with reference to traditions and mores of communities, and generally to cultural processes shared by a group of people. ‘Cultural Commons refer to cultures located in time and space – either physical or virtual – and shared and expressed by a socially cohesive community’ (Fiorentino et al 2010). This kind of social dilemma consists of the elements of culture, space and community. Considering the physical framework, where culture is local and it belongs to a specific cohesive community, it is interpreted as an evolution of ‘cultural district’. In comparison with traditional commons, the category of

commons related to culture implies several differences. First, according to the widely accepted classification of goods (Samuelson 1954; Ostrom et al 1994), cultural commons are more similar to public goods, in that they are not affected by subtractability, thus having an unlimited carrying capacity. As a result, cultural resources are neither subjected to depletion nor to overuse, but still they have to be protected by *erosion*. Hess (Hess, 2008) underlines that literature on cultural commons, at least in a first moment, has developed in opposition to privatisation and commodification of cultural heritage and objects. However, the problem of protection concerns not only material attributes, thus cultural heritage and artistic representations, but also local cultures, with their traditions and mores. On the other hand, issue of deterioration is about the quality of the resource instead of its quantity (Fiorentino, 2011). The question has to do with the difference between the resource system and the flow of the resource units, which is generated by the first one (Ostrom 1990). Unlike natural and knowledge resources, such as Internet, cultural assets can rarely be distinguished between flow and units. Indeed, if one considers “water” as a resource unit from groundwater basins and data packets as flow from the Internet (Hess and Ostrom 2003), it might be difficult to find an equivalent example for cultural resources. Moreover an important difference pertains to the category of appropriators, which appears to be unsuitable for this kind of resource. Scholars (Fiorentino et al 2010; Fiorentino 2011) observe that the behaviour of some agents characterises them rather as contributors - the term describing subjects who effectively contribute to the development of the common. In spite of natural resources, as Nonini points out (Nonini 2006, p.167), cultural resources need ‘human involvement for their regeneration’. From this perspective there will not be problems of overexploitation, but rather the underproduction of the commons, in the sense of cultural inputs (Fiorentino et al 2010): ‘The problem here is indeed not overuse, like in natural commons, but reaching the critical mass that makes a given culture self-sustaining’ (Bravo 2010, p.4). Cultural commons are not affected by the “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin 1968); rather, their value grows by using resources that involve the so-called phenomenon of the ‘cornucopia of the commons’. Moreover, in some cases, unlike traditional commons, where the overuse causes the depletion of the resource, the use of cultural resources can produce positive externalities, as in the case of reputation and fame spanned from an artistic wave to the local cultural production (Fiorentino et al 2010).

However together with the problem of harmonization of definition of cultural commons with other kind of public-mixed goods - namely public goods (Peacock and Rizzo 2008, Cominelli 2011) and merit goods (Musgrave, 1957) - there is an even harder theoretical step which is the shift from the local to the global dimension that concerns the debate on the category of *global common goods*. The categorisation of assets, such as knowledge, atmosphere, underwater, space and electromagnetic spectrum, and heritage as well as global commons is a response to the necessity of their protection and safeguard. This category refers to resources which have a global dimension in that they can’t be attributed to any state or community as they are beyond sovereign jurisdiction. The open access to a resource in the absence of a world government is the essential point concerning global commons which can be defined as ‘social constructs that overlay, interpret and allocate ‘brute’ physical facts’ (Vogler 2012, p.61). ‘The common heritage of humankind’ represents an important attempt to provide a new institutional regime of governance for common areas not based on the extension of sovereign jurisdiction (Vogler 2012).

However, if the categorisation of cultural commons is especially suitable for intangible goods like knowledge and information (Madison et al 2008) and for cultural and artistic expression of a community (Fiorentino et al 2011), the possibility of defining physical cultural commons at global level is even harder. Indeed, a stream of literature on cultural commons has especially focused on the analysis of Unesco World Heritage (Buzio and Re 2010; Zhang 2010; Dabiru 2010) as it represents ‘the most relevant cultural and natural asset for humankind’ (Bertacchini and Saccone 2012). Unesco World Heritage activity, in force of the 1972 Convention concerning the Protection

of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, is the most important example of a global strategy for preserving and promoting heritage of universal value. Indeed these sites are important both on global and on local level: accepted by the international community, their relevance is, at the same time, the expression of their group of reference. Scholars study the implications of conceiving World Heritage as a common-pool-resource (Buzio and Re 2010; Zhang 2010), questioning the new mechanisms of governance. Moreover Buzio (Buzio 2012) analyses several Unesco Italian sites, finding in some cases similarities with the idea of commons, while Cominelli utilises commons approach for the study of traditional craftsmanship in France (Cominelli 2011). Both underline the importance of the connection between resource, community and surrounding environment and of course the active participation of people.

From this perspective, it would be interesting to investigate the site selection process of Unesco sites, to understand if it allows a collective action for possible self governing strategies of local communities or if it corresponds to a top-down approach where rules, principles and attributes are decided at a supranational level among club members. Previous scholars (Bertacchini and Saccone 2012, De Simone and Di Maio 2012) have already emphasized that inclusions of properties in the World Heritage List are mostly a matter of power of each State Party where ‘benefits of having sites with World Heritage status only accrue in forms similar to a club good’ (Bertacchini and Saccone, 2012).

However, previous studies have not considered the first step of the selection process that is the submission of Tentative Lists, which are inventories of heritage submitted by each State Party for a possible future inclusion in the World Heritage List. These lists should be, first of all, the most important expression of the locally defined heritage possibly in a commons-like framework. Results of the empirical analysis will show that again political economy variables play a great role in conditioning the number of submissions at state level.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In the following section we will show the results of the empirical analysis performed on World Heritage Tentative List which refers to sites submitted by each country for a future possible inclusion in the World Heritage List. Tentative List is an inventory of sites of greater interest which State Parties intend to submit to the process of inscription for the World Heritage List in the subsequent next five to ten years. Each State is encouraged to add in List all those properties that are accounted for universal, cultural and/or natural value, and, hence, they are eligible for World Heritage List. Inscription on Tentative List is a necessary condition to be recorded in the World Heritage List; indeed, Tentative List must be submitted at least one year before the requirement of any nomination. State Parties are able to re-examine and update their Tentative List at any time, even though they are suggested to do it at least every ten years. The submission procedure requires some details concerning the site, as a brief description, geographical information, the ‘justification of outstanding universal value’ and the ‘statement of authenticity and/or integrity’. Unesco also encourages State Parties ‘to prepare their Tentative Lists with the participation of a wide variety of stakeholders, including site managers, local and regional governments, local communities, NGOs and other interested parties and partners’ (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/>).

Data on Tentative List are from Unesco World Heritage Centre and concern 147 countries at the end of 2006 (5 countries were excluded from the sample due to data shortness). Properties differ, together for their nationalities, also for their date of inscription (the oldest belong to Bulgaria and are dated 1984) and for their category (cultural, natural or mixed properties). Figure 1 and figure 2

show that the total distribution of properties in the Tentative Lists and their allocation among continents with a higher number of submission for Europe and North America.

Figure 1: distribution of total tentative lists in 2006

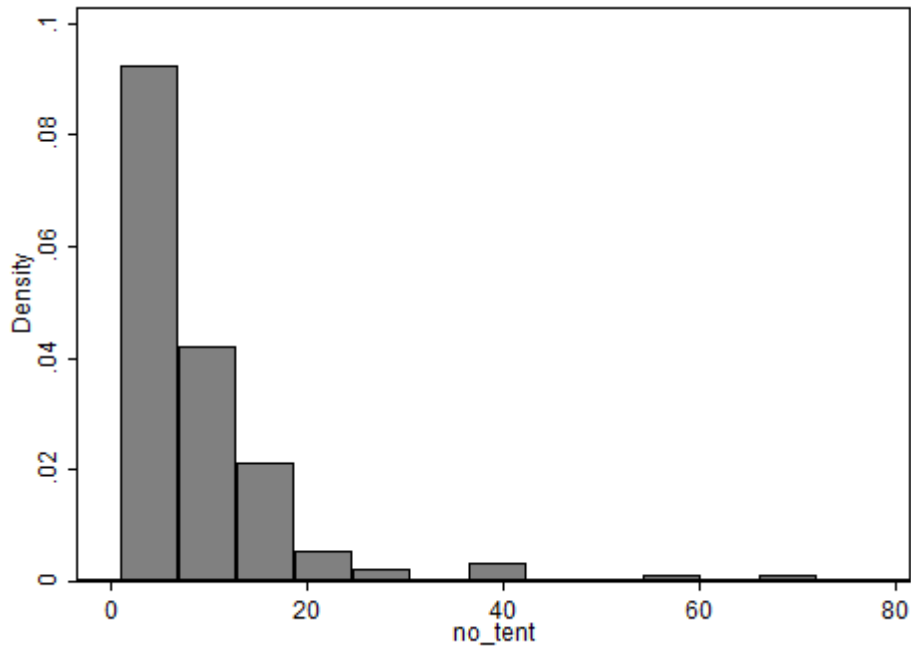
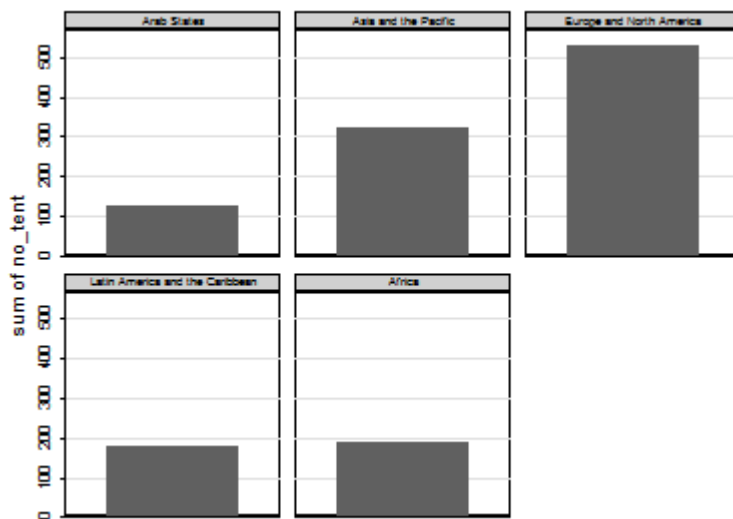


Figure 2: distribution of tentative lists per country area in 2006



In order to analyze Tentative Lists, we imagine the process of submission of sites by each country as a demand driven process. Analysis would be cross-sectional as we do not possess exact information on yearly submissions by each country.

Previous literature on political economy of culture (Delle Nogare and Galizzi 2011; Bertacchini and Saccone 2012) has emphasized the role of economic as well as political variables in the mechanism of governance of heritage. Moreover, as we already pointed out, there is an evident tension between the submission process, which is formally national, and the process of specification and characterization of the sites, which is evidently locally rooted.

For this purposes the following model is estimated:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_i + \beta_2 U_i + \beta_3 D_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where:

- y_i represents the number of sites submitted by the i -th country at the end of 2006. We do not differentiate between cultural and natural sites as we expect that the decision process does not vary across types of heritage properties. X_i is a vector of country specific characteristics in 2006 as the surface area (sq. km), the population growth and GDP per capita (expressed in PPP at 2005 constant prices). The source is World Bank Development Indicators.
- U_i is a vector of political information as the Unesco-related information for each country such as the number of sites previously inscribed in the World Heritage List - either cultural or natural or total- and the number of mandates in the World Heritage Committee before 2006 (<http://whc.unesco.org>). We included also the assessment of civil liberties by each countries according to the Freedom House on a rating scale from 1 to 7 where a higher value indicates a lower protection of civil liberties (www.freedomhouse.org).
- Finally, D_i is a vector of categorical variables concerning the type of country (five categories: 1. Europe and North America; 2. Asia and the pacific; 3. Arab States; 4. Latin America and the Caribbean; 5. Africa); and the ratification date of the World Heritage Convention (four categories, one for each decade starting from the Seventies) while ε represents the error term.

Table 1 provides summary statistics of the variables used.

As the dependent variable only takes natural numbers we use a count model regression: in our case, we use negative binomial regression as there is evidence of overdispersion. Statistical analysis was performed using STATA version 11 (STATA Corp., TX, USA).

Table 1: descriptive statistics

Variable label	short description	Observations	Mean	Std.Dev.	Min	Max
no_tent	total submissions in tentative list	147	8.96	9.76	1	72
no_tenc	cultural submissions in tentative list	147	5.92	6.51	0	42
no_tentn	natural submissions in tentative list	147	1.94	3.25	0	28
total_whsites	previous total inscriptions in WHL	147	5.45	7.65	0	40
wh_cultural	previous cultural inscriptions in WHL	147	4.31	6.66	0	39
wh_natural	previous natural inscriptions in WHL	147	1.03	1.94	0	12
mandates	number of mandates in the WH Commitee	147	0.79	1.06	0	4
Cl	civil liberties	147	3	1.74	1	7
Popgrow	population growth	147	1.35	1.32	-0.68	11.27
surface	surface	147	87.59	216.86	0.02	1709.82
Gdppc	per capita GDP	147	11.4	12.4	0.17	70.58

RESULTS

Our results are reported in table 2.

Table 2: Negative binomial regressions results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	
Dependent variable: number of total sites submitted in the tentative list				Dependent variable: number of cultural sites submitted in the tentative list				Dependent variable: number of natural sites submitted in the tentative list		
surface	0.001*** (0.00)	0.000 (0.00)	0.001* (0.00)	0.001*** (0.00)	0.000 (0.00)	0.001 (0.00)	0.002*** (0.00)	0.001 (0.00)	0.001 (0.00)	
Popgr	-0.013 (0.06)	0.029 (0.05)	0.140* (0.06)	-0.052 (0.07)	-0.013 (0.06)	0.078 (0.07)	0.054 (0.09)	0.064 (0.09)	0.268* (0.12)	
Gdppc	0.010 (0.01)	-0.005 (0.01)	-0.024** (0.01)	0.018* (0.01)	0.002 (0.01)	-0.017* (0.01)	-0.015 (0.01)	-0.025* (0.01)	-0.059* (0.02)	
CI	0.003 (0.05)	0.005 (0.04)	-0.063 (0.05)	0.079 (0.06)	0.079 (0.05)	-0.021 (0.05)	-0.225* (0.09)	-0.214* (0.09)	-0.253** (0.10)	
total_whsites; wh_cultural; wh_natural		0.042*** (0.01)	0.037*** (0.01)		0.046*** (0.01)	0.039*** (0.01)		0.071 (0.09)	0.086 (0.09)	
mandates		0.148* (0.07)	0.211** (0.08)		0.187* (0.08)	0.229** (0.09)		0.283* (0.11)	0.413** (0.14)	
Euro&NordAm			0.000 (.)			0.000 (.)			0.000 (.)	
Asia&Pacific			-0.247 (0.20)			-0.120 (0.23)			-0.657 (0.40)	
Arab count			-0.309 (0.29)			-0.077 (0.33)			-1.051 (0.59)	
Latin&Carib			-0.431* (0.21)			-0.482* (0.24)			-0.939* (0.40)	
Africa			-0.756** (0.25)			-0.703* (0.29)			-1.382** (0.48)	
Ratify70			0.000 (.)			0.000 (.)			0.000 (.)	
Ratify80			-0.017 (0.14)			0.015 (0.16)			0.171 (0.28)	
Ratify90			0.262 (0.17)			0.259 (0.19)			0.397 (0.34)	
ratify2000			-0.526 (0.28)			-0.892* (0.35)			0.004 (0.51)	
constant	1.903*** (0.22)	1.665*** (0.18)	2.154*** (0.26)	1.259*** (0.25)	1.009*** (0.21)	1.587*** (0.29)	1.081** (0.28)	0.893* (0.36)	1.450** (0.49)	
obs.	147	147	147	147	147	147	147	147	147	
Log-likelihood	-455.449	-432.059	-420.872	-406.406	-384.819	-373.380	-259.896	-255.202	-249.464	

Note: standard error in parentheses. *** p<0.01; **p<0.05; *p<0.1. Total previous inscription in the WH List are considered in model 1-3 while only cultural properties in model 4-6 and natural properties in model 7-9. One observation dropped.

Models 1-3 consider as dependent variable the total number of sites submitted per country in the 2006 Tentative Lists while models 4-6 and models 7-9 show the regression results considering as dependent variable, the cultural properties submitted and the natural properties submitted respectively.

Looking at models 1-3, we notice that the surface area is significant in model 1 and 3 and population growth and GDP per capita are significant only in model 3: negative sign for this latter implies a negative effect of that variable on the number of submissions. GDP per capita is still negatively related to the inscription also in the case of cultural and natural submissions considered separately

Previous inscriptions in the World Heritage List and the number of mandates in the World Heritage Committee seem to affect positively the number of total inscriptions. Participation in the world heritage committee affects positively also the submission of cultural as well as natural sites in the Tentative Lists while higher previous natural properties inclusions in the World Heritage List seem not to condition natural inscriptions in the Tentative List, as shown in models 8 and 9. In model 3 we notice that, (but the effect is even more stronger for the cultural submission), the expected log count for Latin and Caribbean countries is 0.43 lower and the expected log count for African countries is 0.76 lower than the expected log count for European and North American States which means that there are differences in the submission policy across country areas.

The same results are verified also in the case of sole cultural and sole natural properties. Concerning the ratification convention date, only in the case of cultural submissions, we find that the expected log count for ratification in the 2000 is 0.89 lower than the expected log count for ratification in the Seventies that means that new members are less likely to submit cultural properties in their list.

Population growth is significant only in model 6 and 9 while civil liberties variable exhibits a certain degree of significance (negative, as the higher value implies lower civil rights according to the Freedom House rating scale) only in the case of natural sites submissions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present paper aimed at discussing the conditions which make heritage an example of cultural common.

After a brief discussion of the ongoing literature on cultural commons (Madison et al 2008, Fiorentino et al 2010; Fiorentino 2011; Buzio and Re 2010; Zhang 2010; Dabiru 2010; Cominelli 2011), we analyze the possible extension of this definition to global physical cultural common - as it appear a property, either natural or cultural, which, albeit rooted in a well defined space, culture and community, is endowed with 'outstanding universal value'.

World Heritage is often cited as an example of global common because consists of areas defined as being beyond sovereign jurisdiction (Vogler, 2012). As a matter of fact, Unesco World Heritage activity provides a global strategy for 'recognize and protect sites that are outstanding demonstrations of human coexistence with the land as well as human interactions, cultural coexistence, spirituality and creative expression' (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/globalstrategy>).

Our empirical analysis aimed at analyzing the determinants of the State Parties' Tentative Lists as an example of locally rooted but nationally defined cultural commons which, according to the declared preference of each country, should possess also the universal value criteria to be included in the World Heritage List. The Tentative List submission represents the first step of the process of recognition and selection of final World Heritage List and is completely left to each State Party which decides how many and which kind of sites to submit or not.

In details, we were interested in assessing the role of physical, economic and socio-political variables in conditioning the number of submissions at state level, as literature has already emphasized that the final decision process is mostly a matter of club like framework strategies (Bertacchini and Saccone 2012, De Simone and Di Maio 2012).

By means of a negative binomial regression analysis we show that, in some cases, country characteristics like population growth (in a positive way) and country wealth (in a negative way) affect the identification of sites by State Parties but the most interesting result is that the number of previous inscription in the World Heritage List as well as the number of mandates in the World Heritage Committee play a role in determining the capacity of submitting properties in the Tentative Lists. Moreover some countries (like African countries) are less likely to submit sites.

Albeit Unesco World Heritage can, in a general way, possess some of the characteristics of cultural commons (Buzio and Re 2010; Zhang 2010; Dabiru 2010), we conclude that the choice of sites selection for a possible inclusions in the List follows from strategic decisions in a club-like (instead of common-like) framework.

Our results confirm the thesis expressed in De Simone and Di Maio (2012) and Bertacchini and Saccone (2012) which demonstrate that the benefit of having a site included in the World Heritage List can be considered as a club good.

As the process of inscription of properties in the Tentative Lists seems to follow a ‘top-down’ approach where the choice of the sites to be included is strategically decided at central level, we cast some doubts on the effective capacity of the Tentative Lists submission process in reflecting idiosyncratic values expressing identity and symbolic dimensions of different communities in each country.

A preliminary conclusion of our work would be in line with the ideas expressed by the Economists’ journalist (The Economist 2012) which blames that Unesco prefers to deal with governments instead that with the local community which, as the literature has emphasized, is the sole responsible of identification, protection and preservation of heritage. Hence the categorization of World Heritage as a global cultural commons is still an unresolved puzzle where the solution concerning the best management strategy has to be found in a more accurate analysis of the institutional framework both at local and supranational level.

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