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“Which and Whose Italy?” Answering to Paul Ginsborg’s *Salviamo l’Italia*

Norma Bouchard

As Paul Ginsborg explains in the first pages of his latest book, *Salviamo l’Italia* (2010), the motivation that led him to write this provocative new work is to provide a cure for the pervasive habit of Italians of speaking poorly of their nation while charting a new role for Italy in the modern world. His main strategy consists in revisiting the personalities of the participants in Risorgimento nationalism since their lives and works, Ginsborg observes, could provide a path to address and redress Italians’ disenchantment with their nation. In the paragraphs that follow, I will summarize the main tenets of Ginsborg’s argument before proceeding with my own reflection on both Ginsborg’s book and the ensuing roundtable discussion between Randolph Starn, Lucy Riall, John Agnew, Alberto Banti, and Silvana Patriarca. Conceived as “an opener” to the theme of Volume 2 of *California Italian Studies*, “Italian Futures,” this forum was designed to provide answers to the broader question of Italy’s future prospects, particularly in light of the reflections prompted by the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Risorgimento.

Ginsborg’s book begins with a survey of nineteenth-century personalities within whose works he locates concerns over the public and private spheres of life that are common in today’s Italy. However, according to Ginsborg, what distinguishes nineteenth-century individuals from our contemporaries is that despite their strong sentiments about the decline and decadence of Italy, they remained committed to propelling the nation forward, to its resurgence and regeneration or, more precisely, to its “risorgimento.” In short, for men like Luigi Settembrini, Camillo Cavour, Giuseppe Mazzini, and especially Carlo Cattaneo, the nation, despite inevitable setbacks, was viewed as a necessary consortium to further historical and human progress. Acknowledging the skepticism over the nation in light of its evolution from the early phases of “liberazione nazionale” (32) to the destructive forms of aggressive, imperialistic, and xenophobic nationalism of the twentieth century, Ginsborg rightly devotes the first chapter of his book, “Vale la pena di salvare l’Italia?”, to discussing how the interests of nation-states have often prevailed over the pursuit of a common human good. Yet he also strives to make a case for the nation by seeking to distinguish between negative and positive forms of nationalism. Drawing upon reflections by George Orwell, Simone Weill, and Carlo Rosselli, he proposes a definition of a nationalism that is closer to patriotism inasmuch as it implies a love of place, a sense of belonging enabled by civic pride as well as by shared memories, traditions, and rituals: “l’amore per un luogo, la sensazione di appartenervi, la celebrazione di storie, sia personali che pubbliche . . . memorie e tradizioni, paesaggi e itinerari, poemi e dipinti, canti, sia laici sia religiosi, cibo e bevande” (40). This renewed definition of nationalism as a “benign patriotism” allows Ginsborg to pursue the argument that the Italian nation is indeed worth preserving and, in the second chapter of his volume, “La nazione mite,” he charts a course for the “rinascita” (85) of contemporary Italy. He isolates a set of four values of Italy’s political and cultural tradition that, despite their historical marginality, can provide the basis upon which to give a new finality to the nation. These values are federalism, a European vocation, equality, and gentleness.

The discussion of federalism leads Ginsborg back to Cattaneo who, in *Sulla legge comunale e provinciale* (1864), had praised the autonomous tradition of the communes of Northern and Central Italy as forms of government capable of providing the backbone for the

nation while developing less exclusionary forms of identity and belonging. Ginsborg also mentions the two democratic republics of Rome and Venice that formed in 1848-9 as significant examples of an Italian tradition of self-government that merits reinvigoration and encouragement. Italy's European vocation is illustrated through Cavour and Garibaldi while equality is discussed in reference to Carlo Pisacane, who trusted in the power of revolution to bring about change, but especially Cattaneo, who believed that the advances of nineteenth-century scientific progress would address century-old social disparities. As for "mitezza," or gentleness, Ginsborg traces the footsteps of Cattaneo but also elaborates on Norberto Bobbio's *Elogio della mitezza* (1994) to argue that this is a value that needs to be nurtured since, contrary to Bobbio's definition,¹ it has an important role to play in social and political relations. The Italian tradition of jurisprudence² is mentioned by Ginsborg as an example of "mitezza," but once again it is the nation of the Risorgimento that provides the strongest models, since Ginsborg refers to the lives of patriotic soldiers who would engage in violent battles but also express humbleness, gentleness, and kindness.

After having isolated the presence of these four minority values in the Italian political and cultural tradition, in the third chapter, "Salvare l'Italia da che cosa?", Ginsborg discusses the obstacles that hinder the resurgence and progress of the contemporary Italian nation: the presence of a strong Church in a weak state; clientelism and patronage; the recurrence of totalitarian impulses; the poverty of the left. With regards to the first obstacle, Ginsborg argues that the Church, despite the reforms of John XXIII and the Vatican Council, continues to exhibit a resistance to modernization, particularly in the areas of individual freedom and gender emancipation. The second obstacle is caused by the corruption of the Italian political system and its endemic practices of patronage and clientelism. As for the recurrence of totalitarian impulses, Ginsborg refers to Fascism but also to the years of Berlusconi, which differed from those of Fascism in the absence of physical violence but were still similar in the manipulation of public opinion and the patronage system enabled by the leading parties. The last obstacle discussed by Ginsborg is that of the weakness of the left, unable to oppose the neo-liberalism of Berlusconi and thus an example of a force only partially loyal to democracy.

The last chapter, "Chi salverà L'Italia, ammesso che qualcuno voglia farlo, e con che mezzi?", brings Ginsborg's argument to closure inasmuch as it is here that he articulates, more fully, his vision of how and through which means it is possible to bring about a new role for the nation despite the obstacles discussed previously. The examples of the protagonists of the Risorgimento are again key to Ginsborg's vision but he finds a much greater significance in the mass-mobilization that took place from the end of the eighteenth century all the way to 1866. Ginsborg then proceeds to locate a similar potential for agency in the "ceto medio riflessivo" (120) of today's Italy, that is, in the men and women who occupy socially useful professions, such as teachers, social workers, public sector employees, and so on. According to Ginsborg, these are the individuals who have developed a much more critical view of the state, as illustrated by their presence at public protests to resist Berlusconi, but he also observes that their protests have had a limited reach since they lack the institutional outlets necessary to bring about transformative change.

Despite such assessments of contemporary forms of mobilization and political agency, Ginsborg ends his volume on a very positive, optimistic note spurred by his highly personal reflection on the "Monumento a Vittorio Alfieri," sculpted by Antonio Canova in 1810 and held

¹ For Bobbio, "mitezza" is a virtue that belongs to those who are not in a position of power.

² Within this tradition, Ginsborg singles out Cesare Beccaria's *Dei delitti e delle pene* (1764).

in Santa Croce. This famed statue represents a woman holding a handkerchief and crying over Italy and Alfieri while at her feet lies a cornucopia, the symbol of loss, abandonment, and unrealized national potential. Yet, at the end of the book, Ginsborg imagines a different version of the statue. The woman no longer holds the handkerchief in her hand but the cornucopia. A group of women and men, symbols of a renewed nation, come to greet her. They have ceased lamenting over the state of Italy and, armed with traditional Italian values and fighting against the obstacles outlined by Ginsborg, they are forging a new future for the nation in the contemporary world.

Moving on to my own reflections about this book, I will say at the outset that I have found *Salviamo l'Italia* a deceptively simple work. While this volume of a mere 133 pages lays out its argument in a very clear, accessible manner—a prologue, a set of four values and four obstacles followed by a proposal to set the nation on a different path—its rhetoric is multilayered and complex. It is a rhetoric that eclectically appropriates older and newer approaches to the Risorgimento, thus combining well-established tropes of national corruption and regeneration to make an emotional appeal for Italy that falls short of outlining new modalities of citizenship and belonging to the increasingly multicultural and diverse world of the twenty-first century.

Indeed, from Ginsborg's chosen title of *Salviamo l'Italia* and the description of Canova's monument representing a woman crying over the destiny that befell upon Italy after the "grande catastrofe" (7) of 1494-1530 to the lists of obstacles hindering the future of the nation, there runs throughout this book an image of Italy as distortion and deviation. As John Agnew perceptively notes, Ginsborg's book has an overarching theme, namely that Italy is a case of negative exceptionalism from presumed European norms and standards. However, the result of isolating a negative distinctiveness of Italy, as opposed to conceptualizing it within a broader comparative perspective, also leads the readers of Ginsborg back to the post-War Italian historiography that characterizes so many accounts of the nation prior to the revisionist turn of the 1970s and 1980s: Italy as a place of familism, clientelism, patronage politics, and transformism; a country of recurring totalitarian impulses, of poor civic spirit due to extreme individualism, and so on.

Ginsborg's fastening onto traditional discourses on the nation also permeates other aspects of his work. More specifically, the attribution of a negative distinctiveness to Italy is the springboard from which he seeks to translate his personal enthusiasm and passion for this country into a call for a reinvigorated political and civic action. To do so, Ginsborg mobilizes the Risorgimento as a major source of inspiration for the future, turning it into an archive of values worth nurturing: federalism, a European vocation, equality, and gentleness. But, as Riall, Agnew, and in part Patriarca point out, this rhetorical move of looking at the past in order to solve the problems of the present is something that has characterized a great deal of Italian political and cultural discourse, from the Renaissance imagined as a "renascence" of the celebrated grandeur of the Classical era to the Risorgimento as "re-surgence" and "re-birth" of Italy to the glories of yesteryears. Moreover, the appeal of these conjoined tropes also permeates the nationalism of the post-Risorgimento era since, from the Liberal monarchy to Fascism and the post-War democratic Republic, governments have not only mobilized the Risorgimento past to seek legitimacy but have construed it as an archive of values and exempla to lead the nation forward.³

Whereas the organization of Ginsborg's argument according to past values and present obstacles repeats a well consolidated discursive paradigm, the infusion of emotion that traverses this work—from Ginsborg's recollection of his friends' caustic remarks over his decision to

³ See Massimo Baioni, "Un mito per gli italiani. Il Risorgimento tra ricerca storica a discorso pubblico," *Italian Culture* 30.1 (2012): 7-20.

obtain Italian citizenship on January 2009⁴ to the sharing of his re-imagining of Canova's sculpture in something of a messianic vision of the future nation – reflects more recent approaches to the historiography of the Risorgimento. I am referring to the scholarly examination of the morphology of nationalist discourse and especially of the mediating role of this discourse in explaining the link between nationalist culture and political action, private and public spheres of nineteenth-century life that owes so much to the pioneering work of Alberto Banti in his *La nazione del Risorgimento* (2000). As an indispensable participant in what has been defined as the Risorgimento's new "emotional regime,"⁵ Ginsborg has devoted some illuminating pages to this topic and made a strong case for the impact of the passions awakened by Romantic culture in furthering the national cause.⁶ That said, there are also limits to Ginsborg's emotional appeals to a twenty-first-century readership. While the new historiography of the Risorgimento provides interesting insights into the encoding of love, virtue, sacrifice, shame, honor, and so on in the canonical texts of nineteenth-century national culture, it has also given rise to a great deal of controversy. While it is not my wish here to address such controversy, suffice it to recall that a number of scholars have pointed out how this new historiography privileges the affective dimension of culture at the expense of its economic, political and rational elements and leaves fundamental questions of reception, coordination, and organization of nationalist emotions within the political sphere vastly unexamined.⁷ But even if one were to embrace the notion that the affective, rather than the cognitive and rational power aroused by verbal and visual artifacts enabled a mass-mobilization that was successfully channeled into a national political praxis in the course of the nineteenth-century, from the vantage point of the present, the ultimate goal of these analyses should be that of enabling a critical reading of the texts of cultural nationalism. This is the healthy practice of "guerriglia semiologica" that Umberto Eco described in *La struttura assente* in an effort to open the symbolic field to an understanding of culture not just as a space of passive consumption, but also as a pragmatic arena of resistance and thus of alternative decodings: "là dove appare impossibile alterare le modalità dell'emittenza o la forma dei messaggi, rimane possibile (come in una ideale 'guerriglia' semiologica) mutare le circostanze alla luce delle quali i destinatari sceglieranno i propri codici di lettura . . . la possibilità di una tattica della decodifica che *istituisca* circostanze diverse per decodifiche diverse . . ."⁸ Otherwise stated, even if we were to accept that the nation, at least as Cattaneo (as read by Ginsborg) imagined it, was an indispensable community to further a teleology of historical and human progress, to arouse nationalism as an agent of social and political change for Italy's future seems to me undesirable in the twenty-first century. Bluntly put, the memory of an example of aestheticization of politics that led to the violence of colonialism and the horrors of totalitarianism through mass mobilization is a specter that still haunts the present. Thus Riall's point about the importance of revisiting not just the nation of the Risorgimento but also that of Fascism during the sesquicentennial is well taken, but so is Banti's critique of Ginsborg's book on the grounds that it reinvigorates marginal aspects of the nation of the Risorgimento to the detriment of its majoritarian traits. While minoritarian discourses and marginal voices were

⁴ Ginsborg reports the following comment: "Beh, Paul, almeno potrai dire assieme a tutti noi altri: 'Mi vergogno di essere italiano'" (3).

⁵ See Silvana Riall and Lucy Patriarca, eds., "Introduction" in *The Risorgimento Revisited: Nationalism and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 13.

⁶ See Ginsborg's "European Romanticism and the Italian Risorgimento" (ibid. 18-36), but compare also Ginsborg and Banti, eds., *Storia d'Italia. Annali, 22. Il Risorgimento* (Turin: Einaudi, 2007).

⁷ See the articles by Körner and Riall, Riall, and Isabella in *Nations and Nationalism* 15.3 (2009).

⁸ Umberto Eco, *La struttura assente* (Milan: Bompiani, 1968), 417-18.

present, as Patriarca observes in her enthusiastic praise of Ginsborg's book for not having reduced the Risorgimento to a "core," I would argue that, in any history, it is possible to find positive values, discourses, and experiences. In this specific context, however, the danger of valorizing the peripheral is two-fold. On the one hand, it flattens the specificity of a period, dissolving and unmaking the nationalism (and colonialism) that lies at the center of European nation-building and state-formation and that, during the Italian Risorgimento, established a modern lesson in warfare, misogyny, martyrdom, self-sacrifice, ethnic exclusion and cultural marginalization whose dire consequences in the twentieth century and beyond are all too well known. On the other hand, such valorization comes at a time when Italy is experiencing a frightening return of nationalistic mythologies. Despite official endorsements of the supra-national models of political, economic, and cultural integrations of the EU, as well as of various International Human Rights regimes (e.g. the Geneva Conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), the Italian legislative system holds fast to normative cartographies of state sovereignty that in recent years have also been inflected by the bombastic rhetoric of the Leghe and of Padania: Italy as a nation of shared religious values, a common culture and, at times, even a (very improbable) genealogical descent. This aggressive rhetoric permeates the discourse of the media on a daily basis where, as Anna Triandafyllidou illustrates in her *Immigration and National Identity in Europe*, widely circulating press discourses tirelessly stress "the different ethnic origins of immigrants . . . identified as 'foreigners,' 'North Africans' or 'Albanians', and hence distinguished from 'Us', 'Italians', 'Europeans.'"⁹ In short, mainstream Italy remains trapped in discourses and practices of exclusions that reveal the resiliency and danger of nationalist agendas.

But aside from striving to re-launch a minoritarian culture to re-awaken national pride, to decline the nationalism of the Risorgimento in a democratic sense, what is perhaps most problematic in Ginsborg's eclectic argument is its essentializing a historical formation into an ontological category. This is revealed, among other examples, in sentences such as "L'Italia esiste, la sua esistenza va difesa" (41). By so doing, this book does not dwell enough on the complexity of the Italian nation and related processes of national identity from Risorgimento to the present. While the description of Italy's tradition of federalism and European vocation from the chapter "La nazione mite" opens the door towards a more nuanced account of identity, overall the volume does not engage in any sustained consideration of the many forms of allegiances and affiliations that constitute the Italian nation and the potential of these various models of belonging for the future. This is the reason why I wish to further pursue Agnew's suggestion concerning the necessity of articulating Italy through the categories of a "spatial history" and recall that this is a country not only characterized by that high degree of cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic hybridity that constitute the mosaic of the "Smaller Italies," but also a nation whose conceptualization, consolidation, and development cannot be dissociated from much broader inter- and trans-national forces. In fact, not only did the rise of a nineteenth-century national consciousness owe much to global networks created by political exiles, radicals, conspirators, volunteers, and labor migrants in Switzerland, England, France, Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Latin America,¹⁰ but, shortly after its consolidation into a modern state, Italy became a global nation. Originating from the subaltern classes, primarily from the Southern regions of the peninsula but also from impoverished areas of the North, such as the Veneto region for

⁹ Anna Triandafyllidou, *Immigration and National Identity in Europe* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 109.

¹⁰ See Maurizio Isabella, *Risorgimento in Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) as well as Donna Gabaccia, *Italian Workers of the World* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001) and *Militants and Migrants* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

example, this global nation, or trans-national “Greater Italy,”¹¹ exists outside territorial jurisdiction, with frames of references encompassing Central and Northern Europe but also Africa, the Middle East, Australia, and the Americas. Yet these “spatial” contexts are repressed by the modern Italian consciousness where *Italianità* continues to be founded upon willed acts of historical amnesia or, in the words of Italian philosopher and sociologist Franco Cassano’s *Il pensiero meridiano*, on the selective forgetting of the multitudes that are in “Us”: “contaminazioni, arrivi, partenze, quella inquieta mobilità dei geni . . . fa di tanti mediterranei . . . degli incurabili bastardi, l’antitesi di ogni purezza, di ogni integrità e di ogni integrismo. Il nostro ‘noi’ è pieno di altri.”¹²

However, in this epochal moment of global migratory movements and flows through and within Italy, the repressed moments of *Italianità* can no longer be forgotten and expelled. Notwithstanding the rigidity of Italy’s legislative measures—of which the Martelli Law of 1990 and the Law of 1998 that culminated in the Bossi-Fini immigration Law of July 30, 2002 are examples—close to 4,000,000 immigrants are now residing on Italian soil. Their presence demands the articulation of a new finality for the nation in an ever more globalized, diverse, and multi-cultural world. In this sense, the linear history that Ginsborg proposes in his passionate appeals to a “benign nationalism”—a minoritarian Risorgimento past to be reinvigorated to solve the problems of the present and move the nation forward—does not nurture new ways of thinking and imagining Italy’s futures. This is an aspect of the book that is rendered even more surprising by the prologue of *Salviamo l’Italia*. In what is perhaps the most personal moment of Ginsborg’s entire work, he describes his acquisition of Italian citizenship after eighteen years of residency on state territory: “Nel gennaio 2009 sono diventato cittadino italiano. Faccio parte di un flusso costante di stranieri, circa 40 000, che ogni anno assumono la cittadinanza italiana” (3). Yet this unveiling of Ginsborg’s own experience of emigration within the context of contemporary in-migration does not unfold into an interrogation of who and what makes a nation. In other words, this book falls short of leading to what Abdelmalek Sayad calls the sophisticated questioning of “state thought,” a probing that reveals what is latent in the social order: “the hidden truth and the deepest foundations of the social and political order we describe as national. . . . ‘denaturalizing,’ so to speak, what we take to be natural, and ‘rehistoricizing’ that state and that element within the state that seems to have been afflicted by historical amnesia . . .”¹³ And precisely because the national order is not denaturalized from the framework of a “spatial history” but rather assumed as an ontology, *Salviamo l’Italia* remains a work whose cognitive structures circle back to consolidated paradigms of traditional discourses on and by the Risorgimento, thus falling short of mobilizing the multiple sites and locations of past, present, and future forms of *Italianità* across territorial, cultural, and ethnic boundaries. Ultimately, then, for the person who writes (i.e., a patois-speaking Waldensian who learned the Italian language in a public school system permeated by Roman Catholic culture as well as a hyphenated Italian after migrating to the United States) this volume not only repeatedly raises the question of which and whose Italy Ginsborg’s *Salviamo l’Italia* is referring to, but it also does not awaken the hope and enthusiasm that Ginsborg’s infusion of emotional appeals for his “imagined nation” might have sought to elicit.

¹¹ See Choates, *Emigrant Nation* and Pasquale Verdicchio, *Bound by Distance: Rethinking Nationalism through the Italian Diaspora* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997). For an excellent account of trans-nationalism from below, see again Gabaccia, *Italian Workers of the World* as well as *Militants and Migrants*.

¹² Franco Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano* (Bari: Laterza, 1996), xxiv-xxv.

¹³ Abdelmalek Sayad, *The Suffering of the Immigrant* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 280.

I believe that, if a new course for Italy remains possible at a time when nations are irrecoverably “at large,”¹⁴ it will depend upon the development of disaggregated forms of citizenships,¹⁵ that is, of models of belonging capable of retrieving, developing, and sustaining the many overlapping allegiances and networks of the “Small” and “Greater Italies” of past and present times, of localism and trans-nationalism as the basis upon which to forge the forms of socialities that are urgently necessary in the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic world that is our twenty-first century. I would like to think that a vision of this future nation was bequeathed to us by the late Sicilian novelist Vincenzo Consolo in his short story “Porta Venezia.” Set in the city of Milan, where Consolo migrated from his native Sicily in the 1960s, this story tells of the arrival in Milan’s Corso Buenos Aires of Eritrean, Arab, Tunisian, Egyptian, Moroccan, Senegalese, and Philippine immigrants. In their presence, a thinly veiled autobiographical “I” frees himself from the strictures of national cartographies to affirm a form of belonging not defined by the shared territories, rituals, and traditions of a “benign patriotism” but rather developed across national boundaries and sustained by a cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic plurality (re)discovered in the trans-national and cross-cultural contexts that are so visible in today’s Italy:

Erano, i marciapiedi di Corso Buenos Aires . . . tutta un’ondata di mediterraneità, di meridionalità, dentro cui m’immergevo e crogiolavo, con una sensazione di distensione, di riconciliazione. Io che non sono nato in questa Nordica metropoli, io trapiantato qui, come tanti, da un Sud dove la Storia s’è conclusa, o come questi africani, da una terra d’esistenza . . . dove la storia è appena o non è ancora cominciata; io che sono di tante razze e che non appartengo a nessuna razza, frutto dell’estenuazione bizantina, del dissolvimento ebraico, della ritrazione araba, del seppellimento etiope, io, da una svariata commistione nato per caso bianco . . . Mi crogiolavo e distendevo dentro questa umanità come sulla spiaggia al primo, tiepido sole del mattino.¹⁶

In conclusion, then, while Ginsborg’s *Salviamo l’Italia* undeniably imparts a sense of urgency to address the many unresolved questions and issues that plague the Italian (and other Western) nation-states, the rhetoric that traverses this book rests upon an eclectic appropriation of traditional tropes of national decadence and future rebirth coupled with emotional appeals that owe much to the new historiography of the Risorgimento. Since Ginsborg’s apparatus of traditional and emerging discourses is founded upon unexamined assumptions about who and what constitutes a nation, the rhetoric of *Salviamo l’Italia* leads to a normative, obsolete vision of Italy as a bounded, unified community. In this failure to mobilize the many local, national, and trans-national sites and locations of *Italianità* that formed (and continue to form) at the intersection of cultural, religious, social, and ethnic allegiances and belongings that are so powerfully evoked in the literature of Vincenzo Consolo, *Salviamo l’Italia* projects an exclusionary image of the Italian nation that is even more undesirable in the multi-cultural and

¹⁴ My reference is to Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ For the concepts of disaggregated citizenship, see Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 171-212.

¹⁶ Vincenzo Consolo, “Porta Venezia,” *Linea d’ombra* 5 (March 1988): 36.

multi-ethnic world of our new century. With all due respect to Ginsborg's invitation to "salvare l'Italia" and in the spirit of futhering this vigorous discussion over Italy's future prospects, my answer will therefore be "no; Paul, non *questa* Italia."

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