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Communication, Consumers, and Citizens: Revisiting the Politics of Consumption

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The year 2011 was defined by the intersection of politics and economics: the Wisconsin protests, the Occupy Movement, anti-austerity demonstrations, the Buffett Rule, and so on. These events drew attention to the role of politics in the erosion of labor power, the rise of inequality, and the excesses of overconsumption. Moving beyond periodic and dutiful action directed at an increasingly unresponsive government, citizens tested the boundaries of what we consider civic engagement by embracing personalized forms of “lifestyle politics” enacted in everyday life and often directed at the market. These issues are the focus of this volume, which we divide into four sections. The first section attempts both to situate consumption in politics as a contemporary phenomenon and to view it through a wider historical lens. The second section advances the notion of sustainable citizenship at the individual/group level and the societal/institutional level, and understands consumption as socially situated and structured. Extending this thinking, the third section explores various forms of conscious consumption and relates them to emerging modes of activism and engagement. The fourth section questions assumptions about the effectiveness of the citizen-consumer and the underlying value of political consumerism and conscious consumption. We conclude by distilling six core themes from this collection for future work.

Keywords: inequality; political consumption; conscious consumption; overconsumption; consumer debt; information and communication technologies

The year 2011 was defined by the intersection of economics and politics. When Fred Shapiro, associate librarian at Yale, selected

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additions to the 2012 edition of *The Yale Book of Quotations*, the Occupy Movement's "We are the 99 percent" topped the year's list. Occupy Wall Street and its offshoots were not alone in offering pithy critiques of the rise of income inequality and the complicity of the state in this dynamic. Competing for the top spot on the annual list were other quotes that echoed this sentiment, from Elizabeth Warren's "There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. Nobody"; to Warren Buffet's "My friends and I have been coddled long enough by a billionaire-friendly Congress" (Frank 2011).

Some trace this sudden recognition of the role of politics in the rise of inequality, the erosion of labor, and the excesses of overconsumption to the Wisconsin

communication influence, focusing on the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in political and health outcomes.

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NOTE: As editors of this volume, we wish to recognize the enormous contributions of the graduate students, past and present, involved in the Consumer Culture and Civic Participation (CCCP) research group and the 2011 conference, especially German Alvarez, Mitchell Bard, Matt Barnidge, Leticia Bode, Jasun Carr, Stephanie Edgerly, Jackson Foote, Melissa Gotlieb, Magda Konieczna, Larisa Puslenghea, Alexandra Rogers, Manisha Shelat, Emily Vraga, Ming Wang, and Dave Wilcox. In addition, we owe a special debt to the members of the organizing committee, the moderators, and the respondents for the conference: Teresa Alpert, James Baughman, Elizabeth Covington, Amber Epp, Douglas McLeod, Craig Thompson, Emily Wood, and Michael Xenos. Major support for the conference at which these papers were first presented was provided by the European Union Center for Excellence, the Department of Marketing, the School of Business, and the Damm Fund of the Journal Foundation. The Departments of Communication Arts, Political Science, and Sociology; the School of Journalism and Mass Communication; and Dhavan Shah's Hamel Faculty Fellowship provided additional support. Last but not least, the staff in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication also merit acknowledgment for their support of this effort. We especially thank Corinne Ahrens, Sterling Anderson, Susan Brandscheid, Janet Buechner, and Dustin McGinnis.

protests of 2011 (Eckholm and Williams 2011; Kroll 2011). “The essential theme connecting events in Madison and New York City is unmistakable. Both represent an economic reckoning at a time of grim unemployment rates and stagnant wages for middle-class Americans” (Kroll 2011, 1). Both are further connected by a sense of indignation that efforts to redress the concentration of wealth in the hands of so few are met by a lack of media attention and political representation (Hardt and Negri 2011). Accordingly, these political movements have made effective use of social media platforms to share news, coordinate action, and poll viewpoints, and have expanded citizens’ repertoire of participation to bypass the state in favor of engaging the market.

Political consumerism in the form of boycotting and “buycotting” exemplify this expansion of what qualifies as civic engagement, moving beyond periodic and dutiful action directed at the state toward more personalized forms of “lifestyle politics” enacted in everyday life (Bennett 1998). These enlarged civic vocabularies (Thorson, this volume) include activities such as recycling, freecycling, and downshifting; fair trade and antisweatshop purchasing; antiglobalism; and, of course, the Occupy encampments directed at bankers and corporations. The notion of a citizen-consumer runs counter to the critiques of mass culture that simplistically understand consumption as the product of commercialized mass media. Of course, the question of whether this sort of consumer-politics is effective and sustainable remains open.

It is against the backdrop of these events and activities, just three weeks into the Wisconsin protests, that a group of researchers from Europe and America gathered at the University of Wisconsin (UW), from March 3 to 5, 2011, to share theories and findings regarding evolving notions of citizenship, political consumerism, conscious consumption, indebtedness, overconsumption, and the rising inequality. This was the second such meeting organized at UW. Five years earlier, in October 2006, many of these same scholars gathered for an international conference titled “The Politics of Consumption/The Consumption of Politics.” Papers from that event were reviewed and revised for inclusion in the May 2007 issue of *The Annals*. The articles collected here extend and clarify the debates begun in that earlier volume while also reconceptualizing the intersection of consumption and politics in light of recent events.

We begin this introductory article by outlining the broad contours of the volume, which is divided into four sections of four pieces each. Each section examines a set of interrelated themes, with the lead piece setting the stage and the accompanying pieces elaborating, expanding, and, at times, questioning the stated assumptions. The first section attempts both to situate consumption in politics as a contemporary phenomenon and to view it through a wider historical lens. The second section advances the notion of sustainable citizenship at the individual/group level and the societal/institutional level and understands consumption as socially situated and structured. Extending this thinking, the third section explores various forms of conscious consumption and relates them to emerging modes of activism and engagement. The fourth section questions

assumptions about the effectiveness of the citizen-consumer and the underlying value of political consumerism and conscious consumption.

Section One: Situating Consumption in Politics

In the first section, authors grapple with situating consumption in both current and historical political moments. Lance Bennett interprets contemporary movements of political consumerism as emerging in an era of “personalized politics.” He describes the decades-long economic conditions that have given rise to a number of forms of politics framed around individual choice, responsibility, and motivation. By this view, consumer politics becomes especially attractive, as individuals are disconnected from conventional politics and social groups and look increasingly for personal ways to address concerns of personal interest.

Louis Hyman’s analysis offers the financial side of this story. He traces the changes in credit practices by the federal government and lending institutions and explores how changing economic circumstances, government intervention, and market behavior combined to enable an explosion of consumer credit during the twentieth century. Hyman details how the availability of consumer credit allowed major financial institutions to continue to fuel the consumer economy even as wages and jobs—once themselves bolstered by lending to small businesses—evaporated. As Hyman puts it, whereas once “the 1 percent paid the 99 percent in wages, after 1970 they increasingly just lent them money.” The debt-driven economy created by businesses and the state has direct implications for the rise in inequality and the shift of the U.S. economy from one of labor and production to one of capital and lending.

If Hyman describes the changing financial circumstances of working Americans, Erika Paulson and Thomas O’Guinn demonstrate that at least one of our principal cultural metrics has failed to take notice. In an innovative analysis of depictions of working people in magazine advertisements, Paulson and O’Guinn argue that the portrayed representations have not kept pace with actual realities. Even as income inequality has grown, and working Americans have experienced increasing uncertainties and declining real wages, advertising has offered an increasingly nostalgic and pacifying characterization of working people as cheerful, stable, and, above all, not at odds with the capitalist system. Coupled with Hyman’s assertions regarding the growth of lending, this work implicates mass marketing in the rise of consumer debt.

Kjerstin Thorson concludes this introductory section with an exploration of how young citizens, in the midst of these socioeconomic changes, experience citizenship. Although some young people conceptualize citizenship in terms conducive to what has conventionally been considered active, rich participation, many more are unable to connect local or personal issues to even rudimentary collective, much less political, frameworks. Thorson points to a category of

young people without the vocabularies to fully connect their experiences to conventional political activities but who nonetheless enact their concerns through personal habits and choices. Some of these citizens, Thorson contends, find what we term “consumer politics” attractive, even if they were to draw only limited meaning from the term “politics.”

Section Two: Sustainable Citizenship and Social Capital

Michele Micheletti and Dietlind Stolle open the volume’s second section by proposing that a new paradigm of citizenship is emerging in response to the changes described by Bennett and the other authors of the first section. In their reading, a broadening set of “expectations” for citizenship is becoming dominant, both for individuals and institutional actors. Specifically, they contend that the conventional boundaries of citizenship are expanding, increasingly placing on citizens’ responsibilities that extend beyond the political conditions of current local or national communities. Instead, sustainable citizenship demands considerations of global impact, future implications, and material consequences for nature and animals.

Paulo Graziano and Francesca Forno demonstrate an instance of this sustainable citizenship in practice. The Solidarity Purchasing Groups (SPGs) that they describe represent both the expanded responsibility-taking that Micheletti and Stolle propose and the intriguing form that this responsibility sometimes takes in Italy. Unlike the individually driven (and practiced) citizenship that Thorson and Bennett anticipate, the SPGs take consumer politics to a collective level—potentially magnifying the impact of their consumer choices through coordinated action.

Nam-Jin Lee, Christine Garlough, Lewis Friedland, and Dhavan Shah engage notions of economic, cultural, and social capital, documenting social changes through shifts in taste preferences among Americans of different generations. Drawing inspiration from Bourdieu’s observation that class status and social belonging are established through consumption, they set out to test whether prior findings of highly gendered taste preferences in the United States have survived recent generational changes. Notably, they find that they do not: whereas once women were relegated to tastes reflecting gentility and refinement, today they have more freedom to also express tastes of coarseness and individuality. The reverse is true for men. The gendered patterns of cultural capital that defined older generations do not define younger ones.

Young Mie Kim situates political choices in individuals’ consumption within the frameworks of issue publics (a term used to explain variability in attitudes and behaviors among the public). In her reading, consumer politics is one of the many forms of lifestyle politics currently enjoying growth thanks to the fragmentation of traditional ideological politics and a media environment that facilitates selective information gathering and social sharing. What she highlights is the

potential for such lifestyle communities to find one another and form issue publics, noting the political implications of such publics should elites find them useful for appeals. She aptly introduces the organizing question of the third section: to what extent can individualized consumption choices be the basis for more collective public action?

Section Three: Conscious Consumption and Activism

The volume's third section tackles the difficult distinction between individual and collective action head-on. Margaret Willis and Juliet Schor, who offer compelling data on the relationship between consumer activism and conventional political involvement, lead this section. They argue strongly that accounts of consumer activism as predominantly individual, as opposed to collective, are shortsighted in their conceptualization of the social and political nature of consumption. They try to break what they call the "citizen versus consumer dichotomy."

The next two articles, one by Lucy Atkinson and the other by Melissa Gotlieb and Chris Wells, follow closely on Willis and Schor's arguments. Atkinson uses depth interviews to examine how conscious consumers connect their practices to larger issues. She finds that these practices are inextricably linked to the attainment of collective and public goods. Particularly compelling are her observations about the individual costs borne and responsibilities assumed by conscious consumers to advance public goods from which they do not personally benefit.

Gotlieb and Wells trace a similar line of concern with a quantitative approach. Their main contribution is to explicitly distinguish between conscious consumers with individual orientations and those who see themselves as participating in a collective. Their research indicates that both of these orientations toward political consumption are present in the population. But it is consumers with collective orientations guiding their political consumption who are most likely to engage in other, more conventional forms of political engagement. The study, thus, adds considerable nuance to the larger finding of Willis and Schor.

D. Jasun Carr, Nam-Jin Lee, Melissa Gotlieb, and Dhavan Shah offer a cautionary perspective on the long-term prospects for the citizen consumer. Analyzing trends in overspending, conspicuous consumption, and conscious consumption between 1994 and 2004 across three generational cohorts, they find members of younger generational cohorts, especially Generation X, lack the moderation and civility of their older counterparts in their consumption practices. Thus, their findings do not support the notion that younger generations are increasingly using consumer activity as a locus for political action. Instead, and at odds with other studies, they suggest that it is older citizens—members of the Civic Generation—who most often take larger social issues into account when they purchase. This inversion of conventional wisdom foreshadows the final section of the volume, which offers an agenda for future research.

Section Four: Questioning Assumptions about the Citizen-Consumer

The volume's final section takes us in new directions. Doug Holt demands a rethinking of some of the core assumptions about conscious consumer behavior. He notes the startling lack of correspondence between most individuals' consumer values and their actual consumer behavior. As a result, he argues, consumer politics campaigns have tended to fail because of their overreliance on strategies for value change. Illustrating these points through an analysis of the American bottled water market, he suggests an alternative: a constructionist paradigm that would have campaigners look for ways to reshape the underlying dynamics through sustainability investments in market-focused social movements rather than relying on consumers to accept personal costs for their (professed) values. This calls into question the effectiveness of many of the campaigns advancing individual-level political consumerism and conscious consumption.

Ming Wang, Itay Gabay, and Dhavan Shah consider another element of the intersection of consumer culture and civic culture—political advertising—and how it affects adolescent knowledge and participation during political campaigns. Using an innovative dataset that combines ad buys with surveys, they show that exposure to ads increased respondents' human interest candidate knowledge, but not policy-relevant candidate knowledge. Furthermore, when it came to engagement, adolescents' exposure to negative ads was associated with a decrease in political consumption. As such, this work counters a growing body of research that defends and even lauds the learning and mobilizing effects of political advertising exposure among adults. It appears that attack ads can adversely affect adolescents' learning and engagement.

Tom Hove's article might be seen as something of a cautionary tale to those who would campaign to change citizens' values and behavior. Contrasting rationalist and nonrationalist approaches, he suggests that well-meaning people and groups too often attempt to shape political and consumer choices by changing the underlying values that are thought to guide decision-making. These efforts often wind up minimizing citizens' own agency and adopting a paternalistic view that citizens' behaviors must be managed for them. He advances a view that strives to balance the power between structural forces and individual autonomy. His assertions share some commonality with Holt's arguments, albeit delivered in a different register, and yet invite a debate with the market-constructionist paradigm advanced in Holt's article.

Lewis Friedland, Hernando Rojas, and Leticia Bode close the volume by proposing an agenda for research around questions of communication, consumption, politics, and inequality. After establishing that there is growing income inequality, wealth inequality, economic immobility, and comparative inequality, they question whether political consumption and other forms of conscious consumption—modes of engagement that transfer power to an economic subsystem defined by increasing disparity—offer a legitimate alternative

to more conventional forms of political participation, where legal safeguards provide some semblance of equality. The implications of this perspective are then considered in relation to structural constraint on public opinion regarding inequality and the perceptual basis for these attitudes in media influence. All this suggests a shift away from a politics of consumption toward a politics of inequality.

Core Themes and Directions

While this volume, and the conference from which it emanated, shed light on key aspects of the contemporary and historical landscape of consumer-politics, there is a need for a broader research agenda that explores six core themes that cut across these pieces:

- Rise of individualization: people freeing themselves of institutions;
- Shifts in citizenship: expanding boundaries of participatory engagement;
- Affordances of information technology: the action potential of digital media;
- Differences by generation: younger cohorts' shifts in consumption patterns and political participation;
- Power and inequality: the growth of disparities in voice and income; and
- Global disparities in context: the differences within and between societies.

These interconnected categories recognize that in a postindustrial, consumer-debt-driven society, individuals are under increasing pressure to construct their own lives. Affiliations with public institutions are weakening at the same time that individuals' public and private roles are blending, resulting in new ways of enacting citizenship and navigating consumer culture. Across the articles in this volume, the tension of reconciling traditional public virtue with private concerns looms large. For some, political and conscious consumption has gained legitimacy as a participatory mechanism, bypassing governmental institutions in favor of directing political preferences at financial and corporate entities (Bennett, this volume; Willis and Schor, this volume). Others question the societal potency of political action guided by personal values on decision-making that is ostensibly untethered from institutional or social affiliations (Holt, this volume; Hove, this volume). Yet others find that loose networks formed through associational membership and social media have replaced institutional connections (Graziano and Forno, this volume; Wang, Gabay, and Shah, this volume).

Individualization certainly challenges the power of traditional political institutions in organizing and mobilizing citizens for political action, the decline of which is thought to be "offset at least in part by increases in the relative importance of informal, fluid, personal forms of social connection" (Putnam 2002, 411). Yet even though the modes of political action become more network-oriented and less

formal than before, activities associated with political consumerism, conscious consumption, freecycling, and downshifting still pertain to collective issues and concerns (Atkinson, this volume; Gotlieb and Wells, this volume; Thorson, this volume).

Intimately linked to the rise of individualization is the shift in definitions of citizenship in contemporary politics. Whether considering the expanding civic vocabularies of younger citizens, both stated and unstated (Thorson, this volume), or the rise of sustainable models of citizenship (Micheletti and Stolle, this volume), this volume continues the expansion of the range of activities that are considered part of citizens' civic repertoires. While citizenship has traditionally been understood as a relationship to the state, these connections are in flux with the growth of the market as the location of political action (Kim, this volume). Indeed, the Occupy Movement, with its focus on the financial sector, suggests a further expansion of civic options.

As people expand their civic repertoires, it is critical to understand the role of information and communication technologies in relation to these changes. A number of contributors attempt to explain how digital communication technologies (e.g., Internet, social media, and mobile media) and unconventional cultural forms (e.g., news satire programs, negative campaigns) play a role in the shifts in citizenship (see Bennett, this volume; Kim, this volume; Thorson, this volume; Wang, Gabay, and Shah, this volume). Yet others point to the potential of these technologies in the formation of social collectives that provide a means of bypassing institutional mechanisms (Graziano and Forno, this volume). These emergent and unconventional communication systems are thought to have particularly potent and unique effects on the youngest generations.

It also noteworthy how differently older and younger generations behave in their consumption practices and the ways in which society and societal depictions have shifted over time. Whether examining the sources of consumer debt (Hyman, this volume) or the representations of the working class (Paulson and O'Guinn, this volume), the importance of placing questions of politics and consumption into a larger historical context becomes apparent. Some of this work explains how and why younger generational cohorts are particularly prone to overconsumption, indebtedness, and the blending of consumer and civic identities (Carr et al., this volume; Lee et al., this volume), with adolescents displaying novel reactions to the intersection of consumption and politics (Gotlieb and Wells, this volume; Thorson, this volume; Wang, Gabay, and Shah, this volume).

This leads to the fifth major theme: the rise of inequality and the exercise of power. Many of the pieces included here question whether individuals can resist the power of markets and, more importantly, how resource allocation and inequality influence political processes (Hyman, this volume; Friedland, Rojas, and Bode, this volume). Sometimes implicitly, but often explicitly, these contributions highlight the role of government in helping to create the apparatus that spurs debt and inequality, an apparatus that pushed citizens toward the market. If the "public" collapses in favor of the private, it remains to be seen whether a polis is

possible without social solidarity. In a context of increased economic inequality, this movement toward lifestyle politics may maximize political disparities instead of favor more equality in political expression.

The challenge of inequality in economic and political power is particularly acute in an increasingly unequal world, which leads to our final theme: growing global disparities. Although a number of the pieces in this volume touch on the issues surrounding the growth of economic inequality in the United States (Hyman, this volume; Friedland, Rojas, and Bode, this volume), inequality on a global scale receives far less attention despite the fact that it far outpaces disparities within the U.S. context. Comparative analysis by Branko Milanovic, a lead economist for the World Bank, of household income adjusted for differences in purchasing power finds that “those at the 50th percentile in the United States are at the 93rd percentile globally, [whereas] even the very poorest Americans—those at the 2nd percentile of income in the United States are at the 62nd percentile globally” (Khim 2011, 2; Milanovic 2011). Of course, this does not justify the growth of income disparity in the United States, but it does place the questioning of economic inequality in a larger frame.

Concluding Thoughts

When we opened the conference that gave rise to this volume on March 3, 2011, in the midst of protests that would soon draw 100,000 citizens to Wisconsin’s state capitol in Madison to protest the unilateral abrogation of collective bargaining rights for state workers, we could not have imagined how deeply the intersection of economics and politics, particularly the politics of consumption, would define the political landscape moving forward. The Occupy Wall Street Movement, which was, in part, inspired by the Wisconsin protests, lay ahead in September of the same year.

As we write the final words of this introduction, Wisconsin’s Republican governor has just been reelected after a contentious recall, dealing a severe blow to collective bargaining rights for state workers. And despite continued meetings and online efforts, Occupy has begun to fade from the larger collective consciousness. But the underlying trend that gave rise to both movements—the age of inequality that economist Paul Krugman has called “The Great Divergence”—is still with us, not only in the United States but in the streets of Greece and Spain and much of Europe, and is spreading to China, India, and Brazil. We, the editors of this issue, would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that the eruption of inequality back onto the world agenda—in the form of long-term unemployment, declining wages amid rising productivity and corporate profits, the explosion of personal and even national bankruptcy, and the like—has forced us to rethink the meaning of the politics of consumption.

So as we put this volume before you, we also want to raise several questions that put the project itself, for us at least, in a different light. First, and most

starkly, what does a politics of consumption mean at any level—individual, national, or global—when consumption itself is so fundamentally unequal, and becoming more so every day? At the most basic, perhaps even crude level, this question might be posed as, “What is a politics of consumption when so many consume less and less every day?” There is a strong emerging body of evidence (forcefully brought together by Timothy Noah in his recent *Great Divergence* [2012]) that in the United States, consumption among those below the median income is being pushed more and more toward a level in which basic choices are having to be made: Housing or college? Medicine or food? Saving for an uncertain future or paying for health care? Of course, everyone does not have to make these choices. Those above the 75th percentile and certainly above the 90th (which, of course, includes us and many in the academy) are spared these choices. But what does boycotting or buycotting mean in this context? What of expressive or conscious consumption? What does it change, and who can even participate in it?

Second, there is strong evidence in this volume (Hyman, this volume), as well as in Noah (2012) and elsewhere, that the wave of consumption that began in the 1990s, which coincided with the rise and interest in political consumption, was fueled by a mountain of personal debt: for housing whose prices have collapsed or for college degrees that do not bring employment. This debt was not the simple result of the moral failing of hundreds of millions (as conservatives would have us believe), although there was plenty of greed to go around. Rather, as Hyman shows, it was the intentional construction of almost 80 years of national and corporate policy. The growth of household debt tracks very closely with rising inequality. As one venture capitalist urged, it makes sense to replace middle-class income with middle-class debt to create a kind of “middle class serfdom” (Noah 2012, 170). More to the point, what does “political consumption” mean when apparently individualized choice rests on a foundation of debt and rising insecurity?

Third, there is growing evidence, presented in this volume, that collective forms of protest and politics are being overtaken by—one might say dissolved into—personal forms of expression. Individuals now choose their mix of politics, a mixing and matching that appears to be unique and, furthermore, that is knit together through social media. This twin development—the apparent de-structuring of society itself and the increasing time spent in weak-tie networks with others via the Internet and social media—is one of the social hallmarks of our era. No one could or should deny it through nostalgia for a solidaristic past in which parties and groups were the foundations of progressive movements for rights and equality—one that is not coming back. However, it is at least fair to ask, Can this individual (if not individualistic) politics, built on weak ties and passing commitments—Occupy yesterday, Kony 2012 today, the cause of the day on Change.org tomorrow—do the same work as more traditional political movements? A number of articles in this volume argue that this politics leads to a new kind of collective action, and this may, of course, be true. But correlation between political consumption, self-expressed political interest or engagement, and social media use

does not necessarily lead to social movement, much less deeper social change. It may be that the kinds of mass movements that gave rise to the civil rights and labor movements are gone forever. But it also may be true that some modern form of these kinds of organized mass movements linked to a transformed party politics, leveraging protests linked by social media, is necessary to confront rising inequality.

Last, it is worth remembering that one country's 99 percent (or at least its upper 50 percent) is another's 1 percent. Consumption, in both reality and the imagination, is both relative and hierarchical. The United States and Europe still sit atop a world in which most people see attaining the position of the lower quintiles in the United States as a huge improvement—one that they will likely not see in their lifetimes. We say this (obviously, we hope) not to excuse inequality in the developed world. Rather, we simply want to point out that just as the aspirations to consume are global, so is the inequality that shapes any politics of consumption for the foreseeable future.

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