Teaching “fundamental values” in the Swedish education system: Towards an anti-authoritarian Regime of Truth

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teoria e ricerca

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Since the late 1980s, Western Europe’s main education systems have been shaken by a number of reforms that call into question a given around which the sociology of education, from Durkheim (1925) to Bourdieu (1967, 1970), had constructed its objects and its questions: the link between the Nation-State and the framing of educational objectives (Lenz and Tröhler, 2015; Zajda, 2015). Utilitarian values such as diversified provision, competition and market-orientation gained ground in the curricula, which became less detailed, more open to local interpretation and, at the same time, more prone to supra-national standardisation (Be navot and Braslavsky, 2007) This trend also affected systems that had their roots in the public monopoly of education with regard to objectives and management responsibility: over the last 25 years, the Swedish education system in particular has been transformed from one of the most centralised in the world to one of the most deregulated and open to competition in Europe (Levin, 1998; Lindblad, 2002). The legislation put forward in 1989 by the Education Minister (and future Prime Minister) Göran Persson, devolving responsibility for managing schools and employing teachers to the local municipalities, was an early warning sign of the reforming (or counter-reforming) philosophy that would inspire the following two decades, regardless of whether the Social Democrats or the liberal-conservatives were in power (Björklund, 2005). However, this extreme example of ideological conversion, implemented with little or no resistance from the relevant professional bodies, appears to harbour an inconsistency between declared objectives, concrete policies and social expectations. The decline of the public monopoly over education brought new unifying mythologies to the surface, as well as new needs. A diachronic analysis of the structure of the curricula has led me to conclude that the “paradigm inversion” that overhauled the Swedish school system at the end of the 1980s (Englund, 1995) is based on two ostensibly antithetical approaches: on the one hand, a radical administrative and financial decentralisation which, in the name of the market and freedom of choice, swept away the old arsenal of administrative rules, timetables and inspections; and on the other, an equally insistent assertion of an
inalienable set of rules, emblematic of the civic community, based on assumed “Swedish values”. This moral concern, which emerges from my recent research into the fate of cultural heritages in the transformation of the system (Colla, 2017), permeates a broad range of public action: family and gender relations policies, integration strategies, and public service ethics¹. A civic culture which, in international comparisons, attaches the utmost importance to individual autonomy and emancipation from the Sacred sphere (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2006), yet promotes, at the same time, a national morality evinced in solemn declarations, codes of conduct, and opinion-building campaigns. This paper will attempt to make explicit the logic of this paradox – which might incidentally provide a key to the enduring magnetism of the “Swedish model”, as an icon for the pragmatic delivery of major collective ideals – by focusing on the historical sedimentation of the system’s official priorities.

1. Metamorphosis of the moral order: from “values” to the värdegrund

In the context of the liberal shift of 1992-1994, the watchword värdegrund, meaning “fundamental values”, established itself as the translation, in school administration vocabulary, of concepts such as “morals”, “values” and “identities”. The source of this innovation in the jargon of educational policy, was the dispute that accompanied the dismantling of the National Board of Education (Skolöverstyrelsen) and its regulatory structures in 1991. The political debate on compulsory education then turned to subtle discussions around the basic ethical requirements of a school freed from the egalitarianism of the Palme era, and re-established according to the dogma of freedom of choice for families and pupils. In 1993, when Carl Bildt’s centre-right government presented its new draft curricula, a regulatory reference to “Christian ethics” in the preamble provoked a general outcry among some parliamentary groups, which was followed by a debate lasting five hours. The dispute caused a split across the political spectrum and led to a partial revision of the text (Hagström, 1995)². Included in the 1994 compulsory education curriculum (läroplan), värdegrund came into use with such hectoring insistence that it soon appeared clichéd. At the initiative of the Minister of Education, 1999 was proclaimed “the year of the värdegrund”, and värdegrund think-

¹ The Swedish legislator has often elevated the State to the role of collective conscience, or even promoter of universal ethics throughout the rest of the world. In addition to its traditional commitment to combating alcoholism, the law banning all “humiliating” child punishment (1979), the law against female genital mutilation (1982) and the exemplary punishment of prostitute’s clients (1999) are other such examples.

² In the wording finally approved, the education system should be inspired by “the ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism”.

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By sketching a synthetic archaeology of the institutional formalisation of “our values” in the Swedish school system, I shall attempt to explain how this problematics ties in with the more general changes in the demands made on the school system, and with the strategies it puts in place. How could this increasing moral concern – or more precisely, its increasingly categorical manifestation in institutional communication – be compatible with the affirmation of autonomy, in school and by school?

2. School reform, citizenship, community

The academic account of the värdegrund debate and the questions underlying it (“do Swedish values exist?”; “What right do we have to impose them on immigrants?”) appear to be based on two assumptions: that it is a completely new phenomenon, and that it runs counter to the democratic, emancipatory philosophy that had hitherto underpinned the system. Most interventions on the subject subscribe to the notion of a school system that has suddenly converted to economic liberalism and a type of essentialism (Colnerud, 2004; Englund, 1995). Nevertheless, it is easy to see that the quest for a set of formalised shared values pervades the whole development of the Swedish school system in the 20th century. A quest marked by conflicts and successive compromises; a claim which, above all, accompanies the reform in an anti-authoritarian sense, and of which it is an effect. To test this, we would refer to the 1955-1965 decade, and the introduction of the 9-year compulsory school (grundskola). By rolling out its universalist principles to the school system, the Swedish welfare state was the first country, on the Western side of the Iron Curtain, to build up a single comprehensive system of education for 7- to 16-year-olds. The reference to “common values” thus emerges as part of a specific strategy: the affirmation of a non-denominational and objective

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1 Its official purpose was to encourage schools to “put the värdegrund into practice”; ad hoc teaching material was disseminated in schools, with a total print run of 670,000 copies.

4 The theme of familiarising immigrants with “Swedish values” was rekindled in the public debate in the autumn of 2016, in the wake of the previous year’s exceptional influx of refugees in Sweden (162,877 applications for asylum. Source: Migrationsverket, Swedish Migration Agency).
ethics, consistent with a principle that Émile Durkheim held dear: the education programme closely shadows the aims of the society it is inspired by (Durkheim, 1925). The re-designed curriculum, which accompanied the birth of the grundskola from the ruins of the old, multiple track schools system, with its classist undertones, features two specific phenomena: an affirmation of individual autonomy as the main educational objective, and an increasing openness to personal themes and issues. Parent-child relationships, hygiene and sexuality, and the proper management of leisure time and money enter education as ideological features of a medborgarskola: a “citizen school”, antithetical to the theoretical training of urban elites. The proliferation of these new subject areas shifted the moral predicament of the school – and the essence of its legitimacy – into an emancipatory framework. This renewed focus on personally enriching subjects was in fact justified by the notion that they had now been redesigned as factual, quasi-scientific areas of knowledge, reflecting the state of opinion in terms of underlying values, and an anti-authoritarian approach in terms of didactics. This reasoning underlies in particular two areas of the school’s moral message.

3. Religious education reframed: from dogma to the principle of reality

The first of these, as is to be expected, is the teaching of religion. The State Lutheran Church has long exercised an institutional monopoly over the formation of the conscience. Primary education (until 1930) and teacher training (until 1937) were directly within the competence of the State Church and the principle of unconditional freedom of religion was only codified in 1951. As a consequence, “Christianity”, as a subject, was still imbued with a particular aura in the 1960s. The three preparatory committees (utredningar) that were tasked with shaping the outline of the grundskola between 1946 and 1961 had to mediate between State Church supporters and the quest for dogma-free teaching. As a result, the guide-

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5 We should also recall the intellectual tension between Durkheim himself and the Swedish reformers’ source of inspiration: the American educational reformer, John Dewey. The bone of contention was the relativism, even spontaneism of Dewey’s civic education model, traces of which can be found in the reforms examined in this article.

6 The “democratic” school project that had been mapped out since 1948 was based on an expected gradual decline of the family’s socialising function, and the need for the institutions to step in to fill the void.

7 The Social Democratic Party, in power since 1932, dealt extremely cautiously with the identification between Church and State. Until 1967, the Ministry of Education was called the “Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs”, and it was not until 2000 that the Church of Sweden acquired total independence from civil institutions (Colla, 2003).
lines for religious education were based on the idea that freedom of conscience would not be best protected by a ban on denominational content, but rather by teaching from a factual (saklig) approach (Algottsson, 1975). While this precarious compromise ensured the survival of the subject in the school syllabus, its ramifications can still be felt today.

As soon as the new system was up and running, the presence of denominational survivors within an educational project focusing on the emancipation of pupils became the subject of confrontation. In 1963, an editorial in the liberal «Dagens Nyheter» steps up the criticism: the teacher from whom our children must learn objectivity is also obliged to lead prayers before the day's lessons begin. The problem then, is not so much the assertion of freedom of teaching, as the growing gap between two pillars of national identity: the antidogmatic individualism of a social reformism founded on science, and the diffuse influence of Protestantism in social practices. The dispute would inevitably play a part – thanks to direct pressure from the socialists and liberals on the committees – in the continual overhaul of the curricula. Also in 1963, a high school reform project breaks the consensus: the proposal envisages renaming the subject “Religion”, opening up teaching to take in other visions of the world, and transferring parts of the syllabus to other subjects, with consequences for the time allocated to it. In reaction came a petition backed by the Church of Sweden and signed by two million people: one-third of the adult population. It was under the pressure of this twofold challenge that, two years later, the Board of Education launched an initial assessment of the degree of objectivity of the Religion syllabus. This resulted in a report that was subsequently debated in parliament. The problems of principle highlighted by the Committee of Experts – the legitimacy of presenting Christ as the “Son of God”, describing the Revelation as a historical event and the miracles as real – thus took on a political dimension: in a continuation of the trend towards dealing with issues of faith as an element of public debate, individualism and dogma clashed head-on. Several versions of the report were drafted before a final text, including recommendations for teachers, was approved in 1967, in tandem with the launch of the first overhaul of the läroplan. As an emergency measure, a number of books deemed to be too tendentious were withdrawn from sale; encouraged by the authorities, editorial initiatives adopted a new, objective, anti-rhetorical style. The draft läroplan, adopted unanimously by parliament in 1969 (Lgr 69), sanctions this approach. Christianity was still recognised as an “objective” foundation of Swedish social ethics, but all dogmatic claims were abandoned. The doors were pushed open to all competing spiritualities, as well as to the teaching of atheism and the misconceived word “laïcité” is untranslatable in Swedish, and it does not constitute a political faultline.

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deeds of religions, using terminology reminiscent of the school systems of the communist world at that time.

The new curricula for compulsory school became the focus of international attention for the importance it accorded to pupil autonomy. “School democracy”, self-directed study hours and rejection of any gender-based criteria made the Swedish school system a model for reformers the world over; sewing and home economics were now compulsory even for boys. But the impact of aligning all subject content and aims with the civic aims of the school was equally momentous. Under the reformed curriculum, Christianity, renamed “Religion,” becomes – on a par with History, Geography, and “Social Education” – part of a set of subjects focusing on the “social orientation” of the individual. The syllabus confines itself to outlining, in inspirational language, a common instrumental objective for every subject: to help the child adapt to today’s world. It embraces the secular virtues that even anti-clerical activists consider to be indispensable: sincerity, tolerance, sense of responsibility, working towards disarmament, etc. In a context in which the anti-religious front has scored an apparent victory, the principle of the school’s moral responsibility is reaffirmed. According to the new curricula, the shift in emphasis from faith to “major existential issues” has a key advantage: ethical requirements are no longer seen as arbitrary precepts, but as the fruit of the “conditions for coexistence” (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1969). Even morning assembly (samling), which was once reserved for common prayer, is maintained in order to foster a spirit of belonging in pupils and to address topical issues.

The result of the occasionally bitter debate around the secularisation of public education was thus essentially to open up every subject to an edifying rhetoric. Another result was that the issue of the objectivity of teaching lost its polemical, anti-system overtones, and was elevated to a pedagogical duty: a prerequisite for the legitimacy of the educator’s word. As for the legitimacy of evoking religion in school, the issue – save for a few exceptions – would never be raised.

The consequence of the “religion wars”, which made the content of the teaching curriculum a subject for debate in the press, was not just the abolition of religious practices such as prayer in schools; it also reinforced the idea of school’s responsibility for the reliability, in rational scientific terms, of the messages it disseminates. The idea that teaching should confine itself to current knowledge in the relevant subject area had prevailed since before the 1962 reform, but the extra-disciplinary demands that had gained ground in the meantime – existential choices, ethical dilemmas of

9 The success of G. Palm’s essays on ideological “indoctrination” in the Swedish school system (Indoktrineringen i Sverige, Stockholm, Pan/Norstedts, 1968) and those of the liberal Tingsten on bias in history books (Gud och fosterlandet, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1969) are among the political causes of the system’s focus on the theme of objectivity.
humanity, democratic socialisation, etc. – were now challenging teachers’ beliefs and their right to express them ex-cathedra. How might schools guarantee that parents can happily leave their children with them other than by ensuring stricter centralised control of the values taught there? In the eyes of the authors of the curricula, both the survival of moral issues in the new civic framework of the school system, and the recognition of the autonomy of each and every pupil, require stringent objectivity criteria to be set out. Lgr 69 makes this concept a general requirement, and the only one to be worded so peremptorily. If science teaching can only cover that which is “true”, the vast range of opinions and traditions must be covered without yielding any ground to pretended truths that are unfounded or – according to the term used in the first examination of the Religion syllabus – “suggestive”. Distinguishing facts from values and, within the latter category, what is shared from what is controversial:

Teaching should be objective, i.e. factual and comprehensive. The demand for objectivity means essentially that presentation of the matter should include only such statements as are judged to be true or have a high degree of probability. If special reason exists to put forward statements whose content of truth is judged to be lower, then this should be clearly indicated. When presenting notions of life, ideologies, values and, more generally, controversial points of view, it is then vital that different views be balanced against each other without favouring any particular one, unless the “Objectives and Guidelines” of the curriculum, as established by democratic process, directly indicate that certain values should be emphasised and promoted (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1969, 41).

This profession of realism appears, with slight tweaks, in all subsequent versions of the compulsory school curricula. It articulates for the first time in operational terms, a principle that had always been taken for granted: the right of teachers to proclaim what is true and what is right or – and herein lies the shift – the obligation to base their pronouncements on formalised objectives. The laboratory for this new system of legitimation had been provided by the work of another utredning; the protracted deliberations of the “Royal Commission on Sex Education” (USSU, 1964-1974) marked the first attempt to empirically define national values. Its findings reveal an ambition to forge a new form of knowledge, capable of certifying, without calling on the authority of tradition, exactly what it is right to teach in the sphere of social ethics and life choices: in the sphere of “Ought”.

4. Sexuality: a testing ground for a national ethics

As part of the experiments leading to the introduction of the grundskola, Sweden was the first country to introduce, in 1955, the compulsory teaching of sexual hygiene and sexual ethics: not as a specific subject, but through references spread across various subjects, and codified in a
single syllabus (*handledning*) drawn up by the Board of Education and approved by Parliament. While this innovation was the subject of morbid curiosity at international level, its content, focusing on biology and the prevention of venereal diseases, attracted a broad consensus in Sweden. Since the 1930s, family and social policy reform advocates such as the Nobel Prize winners Alva and Gunnar Myrdal had been calling for the State to be involved in promoting responsible reproductive behaviour. The new comprehensive school, which Alva Myrdal had helped to forge, had taken this request on board. The course focused on preparation for marital life, paying little attention to sexuality, other than in its reproductive dimension. It was around the need to overcome this focus, in the name of individual autonomy, that concerns and controversy gradually built up. In the early 1960s, two opposing petitions (one addressed to the government and the other to the King) denounced, respectively, the conformist assumptions of the subject, and the influence of hedonism, which was apparently encouraging early sexual experience and undermining social morality. The sexual controversy (*sexualdebatt*, Lennerhed, 1994), which reopened the debate around the ideological assumptions of the comprehensive school system, touches on a crucial point: the acceptance of the idea that a “modern” school, devoted to the celebration of individual freedoms, is still capable of synthesising the core values of social cohesion without yielding ground to counter-prevailing powers or intermediary agencies (church, family, medicine, etc.). Naturally, the dilemma also involves taking a stand: must the advent of the “contraceptive” society (the term used by the sociologist Zetterberg) be accepted as inevitable? Must schools act as its spokesperson?

Given the threat the sexual controversy posed to school authority, the Board of Education opted for a diplomatic response, but one with a strong impact. Before making a judgment on the content of such teaching, the *utredning* ordered a scientific examination of the dominant values in the country, with regard to the issues involved in Sex Education. What relationship was established between the former and the latter? In a first revision of the syllabus (1965), the school administration sets out the meta-ethical assumptions of the identity of the subject: on the one hand, the historically determined nature of all values relating to sexuality and, on the other, the need to establish the prevailing standards and make them explicit: more modern norms that steer the choices of the mass of individuals towards certain indispensable social necessities. The guiding role of the school is thus safeguarded, even in the realm of self-direction. The issue of how to articulate incontestably the values in question remains open: by overstating the extent of the ongoing *Kulturkampf*, the school administration carved out a crucial role for itself in this quest. Indeed, the inquiry would base its conclusions on a painstaking sociological study: the report on “Sexual Life in Sweden”, compiled by the Swedish Institute for Opinion Research (*SIFO*) under the direction of Hans L. Zetterberg.
(SOU, 1969), was presented to the public as a Scandinavian, more ambitious version of the Kinsey report. In addition to ascertaining an ethos, the study – carried out using a representative, anonymous sample of 2,000 citizens – aimed to assess the extent of public support for tailoring Sex Education to the spirit of the times. An exercise to determine “Swedish values” in a given sphere was thus combined with an assessment of the legitimacy of disclosing them. In adhering to a sociological definition of its function, the school system defers to the dominant opinion.

The final report, an 800-page volume published in 1974 (SOU, 1974), focuses on the points of view of the different stakeholders (parents, teachers and pupils) and the wide range of attitudes that emerged towards the purpose of Sex Education. However, the anti-traditionalist stance of the authors is obvious: the report, with figures to hand, marks a watershed between a declining, authoritarian view of sexual norms, and the emancipatory approach that was destined to prevail. The school system would align itself with the latter. Information about the different types of behaviour and opinions that divide society (sexual ethics, contraception, abortion, etc.) became an integral part of education, with one reservation: the avoidance of any “authoritarian” preaching. While the pupils – according to the postulations that would drive the reform for at least a decade – are bearers of “values”, they must be totally free to build their own character, on the strength of taboo-free information about the choices they will have to make. If this anti-authoritarian commitment is respected, the authors explain, no parent will be able to say they have been undermined by the focus of the subject10. The latter merely provides future citizens with proven facts, and information that is no less real than the values circulating in society. The psychological restraints that had prompted some teachers to gloss over certain aspects of the syllabus are left unmitigated. Transparency is mandatory11, both as regards the reproductive function, which must be presented without hesitation (going as far as to consider showing explicit films of sexual intercourse in the final classes of compulsory school), and types of behaviour that had previously been classified as marginal or deviant.

In decoupling teaching from the previously prevailing Puritan assumptions, the USSU established a new totem: the natural needs and objective rights of the future citizen. The new “syllabus”, developed in 1977 on the basis of the same project, aimed to be comprehensive. The topics

10 The events of the following two decades – with problems resulting from mass education of refugees from the Near and Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa – would come to undermine this optimism. However, the schools board has continued to invoke – in response to parents opposed to the empowering aspect of Sex Education – the right of the child to be free from all taboos.

11 A reference to the Foucauldian analysis of the constitution of “sex” as an object of discourse (Foucault, 1976, Chapter V) appears inevitable here.
to be covered and the style to adopt for the different target learners were examined meticulously. The project opted clearly for a positive, teleological approach to self-determination: *ad hoc* arrangements were devised for distinct target categories (“handicapped”, “sexually inactive”, “immigrants”)](12). Even this educational diversification was justified as being in the interest of the recipients: in the case of immigrants, it was done to protect them from the “removed-from-reality” views pushed by the commercial media; and partly to mitigate the shock of the impact with the more uninhibited attitudes of their new environment. But the directivist focus on the young immigrant, to whom a conservative sexual ethic is implicitly attributed, also corresponds to the aims of Swedish society as a whole:

The Swedish school system must continue to promote Swedish society’s development towards greater gender equality, even where this notion does not correspond to that of certain minorities (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1977, 113).

The transversal nature of this theme means that every subject needs to schedule opportunities to address the ethical issues raised in the syllabus: the first signs of a national common sense, elevated above the various fields of knowledge. Although the term is still used with caution, the principles of sexual education are, quite clearly, “Swedish” values, as well as tools for integration.

5. **Values to choose, values to accept**

The overhaul of the single syllabus crowns symbolically the advent of the “citizen school” that had been envisaged in the 1950s. It introduces the principle of neutral but comprehensive education, a faithful reflection of the demands of a society of individuals, in the more controversial sphere of scholastic discourse. A minority of problems – such as abortion – are presented as invitations to “discussion”; others feature as themes on which the “Swedish people” have come to an agreement.

The wealth of examples contained in the 1974 report makes it possible to identify several models of *legitimate* directivity within the framework of neutral education. The legitimacy of this new type of persuasion is expressed above all in the negative, as a form of protection against tendentious intentions deemed to be alien to schools by definition. The doc-

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12 Reconciling the purpose of Sex Education with the expectations of immigrant populations would long be a matter of concern for the school authorities. Several information measures and initiatives were organised for families, until differentiated lessons based on ethnic origin were introduced.

13 The 1974 inquiry, for example, criticised Religion courses for their lack of discussion of the legitimacy of masturbation.
ument states that education must remove the student from the seduction of “deceptive” values. Certain sources of conditioning – such as “commercial” values or peer group influence – are stigmatised: one of the clear aims of Sex Education in schools is to turn them into counter-models. In this control perspective, which provides no opening for the free play of hidden persuasion – nor even for the free speech of the teacher – the dramatisation of the alternative between unanimous and divisional values leads to the emergence of a new type of teaching; one that is tolerant but firm, capable of a relativist approach to the themes on which society is divided and a methodical inculcation of the values that are recognised as uncontroversial: gender equality, tolerance of all sexual inclinations, divorce, etc.

When the USSU report was published, this rhetorical scheme was unanimously praised in the specialist press. Comments indicated that the controversy around sexuality at school had petered out. This appreciation for the new “neutral” approach to education can only be partly explained by the fact that reformers, experts and journalists were united around a shared view of the ideal of sexual liberation. The authors of the comments seem to see the new approach as a potential way to square the circle, by translating the discourse of autonomy into a new register of moral education. The USSU inquiry shows the enlightened teacher a way out of relativism. This account, which appeared in a publication of the national parents’ association, suggests that the inquiry has launched a new way of “teaching morals” within a libertarian framework:

... the report states that controversial issues must be presented objectively [...] Teaching must not take a stance either way and must not exert any persuasion. But if you read the report in detail, you can see that the idea is that the teacher is meant to help pupils to take a stance themselves.14

Judging by the reactions, the Sex Education reform plan meets a twofold demand that organised society makes on the institutions: to enshrine moral individualism and neutralise it. Let us attempt to fathom this ambivalence. Recognition of the right to self-determination in the sexual and interpersonal sphere is the guiding principle of the project. When pupils are asked to consider value judgments on various topics, they are being treated as emancipated moral subjects. The aim is to invite them to choose and, in so doing, help them to recognise their “own” values. The question is, to what extent is this picture – which transforms the construction of moral subjectivity into a self-reflexive activity – an accurate one? Can a non-directive presentation of the “offer” on the ethical market – by an institution that symbolically places itself outside the world – guarantee respect for the autonomy of the subject? Rather than prompting a choice,
the subject presentation’s constant references to the controversial nature of various topics seems to project a state of confusion onto the social world. A more realistic conclusion suggests that, by encouraging pupils to distance themselves from values presented as “preferences,” the USSU proposal surreptitiously transforms ethical relativism into a project – a discourse frame. This constitutes a discreet but much more subversive step than simply recognising this or that “modern” behaviour: a ban on any Wertrationalität. Once imported into education, the sexual controversy that had divided opinion is emptied of any substantive content and is transformed into an argument over percentages.

Even the reference in the teaching process to the statistical distribution of Swedish values is shrouded in ambiguity. The authors refuse to attach any normative value to the empirical results of the survey. To derive an obligation of conformity from the description of the real world would be to undermine the recognition of autonomy: but this outcome is to some extent implicit. In fact, it is expressly pursued when the results of the survey coincide with the principles of the reform – as in the case of the consensus around the new “contraceptive” moral code. The teacher is thus advised to replace “one must” with “everyone thinks that ...”, transforming the facts into a propaganda weapon:

If the school, as an institution, restricts itself to setting out principles, it becomes a weak vector of norms [...] It is probably better to say, “this is what a majority of people in our society think is right and proper, even though, as you know, others do not agree” [...] A discussion along these lines is the best way to assert these fundamental values (SOU, 1974, 553-554).

This remark comes as no surprise since praise for controversy, for pupils’ dialogue around shared or antinomic “values”, is never an end in itself. Both the material produced by the USSU and the accompanying comments insist on one point: the assertion of pluralism does not invalidate the ethical nature of teaching and does not imply an abandonment of the task of cultivating moral behaviour. It must, however, awake in pupils – contrary to the old morality of obedience – an obligation to “take a stance”, removing them from the empire of conditioning by their peers or the market. And herein lies the solution to the apparent paradox, which leads the syllabus to call for a restatement of the values it has revealed to be uncontentious, and therefore self-evident (such as gender equality). Socialisation is not achieved through catechesis, but by “activating” the individual conscience against values that impinge upon its freedom. What we see here, then, is a type of prescribed individualism, in which majority pressure is implicitly considered to be the only one authorised to express itself, to exert itself without limits.

This research ties in with the importance of the dichotomy between “controversial” and common values, which is so crucial that it takes up a whole chapter of its own. Its logical basis appears to be intrinsically
fragile: the cognitive apparatus engaged to identify “true” values does not allow for the next shift, imposed by the syllabus, from the empirical to the normative dimension. It is not the remit of educators or society as a whole to define normative guidelines for schools. The only argument that the USSU makes for normative teaching is of a legal nature: the existence of explicit moral references in the education legislation in force. In the prescriptive part of the syllabus, sexual education is called upon to interpret these precepts and apply them to its own cognitive sphere. Neither the popularity of the themes, nor the teacher’s opinion nor the specific nature of the subject matter can be used to endorse a choice between what should be left to the judgment of the individual, and what should be taught as fundamental. On the latter, the syllabus specifies that the tolerance requirement does not apply. To remove all doubt, the document provides teachers with a list of eleven sets of such “common values”. The right to the integrity of the person presupposes, for example, that the school stigmatises the “vision of the individual that emerges from pornography”; the equal rights principle requires the school to counter “traditional double standards” for men and women in the sexual sphere, but also to make an active contribution towards rejecting “traditional sexual roles”. A new rhetoric thus emerges in which, in very specific cases, abstaining from judgment becomes an obligation. And in other cases, a breach of a rule.

This rendering of and distinguishing between compulsory and subjective values is not specific to sexual education: on the contrary, the model applies to every area of education. The importance of the 1977 syllabus resides in the fact that it makes this explicit and operational, linking teaching with ethical performance: the text includes a detailed map of objectives, specifying the values that pupils will have to “share” by the end of the curriculum, those that they must have “discussed”, and those on which they will have been urged – in the name of education in freedom – to “take a stance objectively and factually” (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1977).

The paradoxical outcomes of the reform promoted by the USSU can be summarised as follows: on the one hand, an ambition to purify teaching of any illegitimate premise (Bourdieu’s “cultural arbitrary”; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970) forces it to place recognition of a hierarchy of more authentic, unconditional values at the heart of the curriculum. The second paradox is that it legitimises an effective regulatory approach in a wider ambit than in the past, barring the way to any extra-social foundation of moral precepts: only democracy, in the sense intended by de Toqueville, shall lay down the law – including in the bedroom. This process appears both original and traditional, revolutionary and conformist. Despite its much-vaunted novelty, this liberation through sexual information has a precedent in the paternalistic approach of the social information campaigns launched by government administrations in the 1940s and 1950s.
(Colla, 2017). Connected to this legacy is the absence, in an argument focusing on the legitimacy of the norm, of any philosophical basis. As if ethics never presented a problem, but was reduced to a coding procedure and the subsequent introduction of a list of legitimate behaviours, whether forbidden or mandatory.

6. Central monitoring of the school syllabus: “operationalised” objectivity

We must get to the roots of the evil.
We must start to imprint new patterns in the new generation
K. Asbrink, parliamentary debate on textbook monitoring, 25.5.1973

As the Sex Education syllabus was being drafted, the conceptual tools it had used to establish the legitimacy of referring to the general will, became part of the general canon of the curriculum debate. Since 1969, the twofold commitment of schools to prescribe and not to prescribe had been enshrined in the curricula. The impact of the formal divide between established “facts” and subjective “values” – hence between teaching that liberates and teaching that aims to condition – on the recipients should not be underestimated. No subject escapes this, irrespective of the degree of legitimacy of its content; this dichotomy imposes a new, explicitly instrumental approach to the study material, and a subversion of the principles upon which it is presented. For Swedish lessons, for example, the läroplan of 1969 formalises the distinction between readings that are “intended to inform” and “intended to arouse emotion”, and recommends dividing authors and texts between the two categories. Among the features it sets out for the history course (1980), we find “temporal perspective on topical issues, whether factual or relating to values”. The ideological goal seems to be to “have it both ways”, dissipating symbolically the abhorrence of a vacuum that a school of self-reliance, divested of a truth principle, risks arousing. While in the potentially divisive sphere of value judgments everything is relative and mobile, the rational curriculum production system confirms the existence of a reality that is not open to doubt, innocuous in so far as it is completely consensual.

The most consistent expression of the intertwining of these two requirements – the repudiation of any arbitrary judgment, and the commendation of “correct” humanistic values – is the institutionalisation of a procedure for certifying the objectivity of the school syllabus. The Erlander government focused on this in 1966, when the political debate around the religious syllabus was still heated, in close connection with the introduction of impartiality criteria for radio and television programmes. The controversy arising from the way the Vietnam War was treated in the media prompted
the political authorities to introduce certain guarantee criteria; these were then extended, substantially unamended, to the “medium” of the school. The procedure was similar to that used to silence the controversy around the teaching of religion: it was resolved by purifying the discussion of any mythological superstructure. On a more theoretical level, in 1969 a father of Swedish reformism such as Gunnar Myrdal was expounding his ideas on the aspiration of objectivity in social research. Condemning the hazards to which a pseudo-neutrality based on false premises was exposing the economy, Myrdal restated the case for a government of experts, working with socially-certified facts and objectives (Myrdal, 1969): full clarification (and thus minimisation) of the value assumptions was the only possible form of objectivity. In schools, too, this affirmation of objectivity had the practical effect of disarming the insidious criticism weighing on the institution, and protecting the authority of a project. A state-level textbook certification body had been operating since the late 1930s, tasked with confirming the technical compliance of the textbooks and the correspondence of the content with current practice and the curriculum. The project presented in 1971 by the utredning that had been set up five years earlier, envisaged replacing it with a new body, the “council for teaching materials” (läromedelsnämnden or LN). The fact that its remit focused on a single task – “verification of objectivity” (objektivitetsgranskning) – bears witness to the ideological legacy of the debates around the neutralisation of Lutheranism in education and “indoctrination” in schools: controversies that had just been rekindled by student protests.

The design of the läroplaner justified the fact that any reference to subject teaching methods or to the identity of the various branches of knowledge had disappeared from discussions of school textbook quality. The emphasis on general civic objectives, to be addressed in an interdisciplinary manner, meant that the bureaucratic apparatus responsible for reviewing the courses had to focus on adapting them to continuously updated imperatives – and on the risk of passive resistance from teaching staff. Contrary to the utredning’s proposal, monitoring would take on a preventive role prior to publication. Only textbooks for “orientation” subjects would be inspected: the spheres of knowledge deemed to be sensitive were those on which the recent reforms had focused, partly to extol the purpose of the new school system (“Social Education”), and partly to denounce the outmoded nature of their objects (History, Religion).

Underlying this objectivity-monitoring project is a democratic-individualistic problem: how to guarantee freedom of conscience in the more

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15 The 1973 legislative initiative by the Palme government glossed over existing provisions on textbook accuracy, and university specialists from the various subject areas were not part of the discussion. This omission aroused some reservations during the parliamentary debate on the proposal (Harrie, 2009).
asymmetrical area of the dialectical exchange between institutions and citizens: i.e. the school system. The chosen solution was to respond to the growing criticism of the subtle *indoctrination* – in the name of religion, liberalism, Marxism, etc. – of which it was accused. As with the Sex Education syllabus, the controversy was resolved “upwards”, by shifting the task of guaranteeing protection of pluralism onto a governmental body, more ambitious in scope, and with a wider remit. The *utredning's* thinking focuses primarily on the implications of the objectivity criteria set out in the curriculum, in order to assess the potential and conditions for verifying compliance upstream. To this end, a number of investigational studies entrusted to various university departments were appended to the report.

In order to define the concept of objectivity in operational terms, the survey embraced the monitoring criteria adopted for television programmes, and which were subsequently “imported” into the 1969 school curricula. To assist it in its work, the committee turned to J. Westerståhl, a political scientist trained in Myrdal’s school of functionalism, and who had already contributed to delivering the public broadcasting censorship system. It should be added here that, some 50 years on, the curricula still adhere to the definition of objectivity that was coined at that time. The work carried out during those years can therefore be seen as laying the foundations for a common sense. Or a “Regime of Truth” (Foucault, 2012), in an extension of the meaning given by Michel Foucault to this concept: a system of mandatory knowledge and skills, which the individual is required to translate into acts. Through public disclosure procedures, formerly legitimate types of discourse and authorities are revealed to be mistaken, and are neutralised with no right to appeal (Foucault, 2012). Indeed, the response of the *läromedelsnämnden* was deemed to be definitive: the review of the curricula acknowledged no higher levels of jurisdiction, nor the validity of any other criteria.

The *utredning's* analysis provides an unequivocal reading of the objectivity requirement: by reducing it to a core of pre-established narrative and rhetorical qualities, it attempts to standardise the verification process and to predict its terms. According to the scheme drawn up by Westerståhl, monitoring the objectivity of a debate or a text involves a number of qualitatively distinct steps:

16 Paul Veyne later introduced the concept of “programme of truth” – understood as a system of categorical propositions which establish, in a given society, the dividing line between truth and falsehood: a concept that is less strongly linked to an act of submission to a power than in Foucault’s analysis.
Once reassigned from a criticism of the imperialism of faith or ideology to that of the certification of the only didactic method possible, the protection of objectivity is confused with that of a mandatory discursive register, able to methodically separate facts and judgments, and to neutralise the latter. The impartiality requirement, for example, stipulates that any presentation of a government system or political thesis must discuss its “good” and “bad” sides, without taking a stand:

If a teaching method or material introduces a liberal view of trade with developing countries, a Marxist viewpoint must also be expressed (SOU, 1971, 273).

In coupling the verification of “objectivity” to a specific rhetorical canon, enshrined in a legislative text, the committee was making a qualitative leap. Objectivity is raised to a sole principle of legitimacy, which allows for no limitations or contradictions, and proceeds from a specific source:

The inquiry would stress that the criterion for the objectivity assessment must be the läroplan (SOU, 1971, 87).

Objectivity is thus a component of the Swedish school system’s pedagogical project. It cannot be reduced to impartiality, and does not allow for intellectual or personal interpretations. In fact – as the future prime minister Ingvar Carlsson puts it in his presentation – it must comply with common sense and social demand. Since the curricula themselves state that objectivity is part of the mental attitude that schools are to promote in pupils, the criterion of censorship embodies, at one and the same time, the limitation of school authority, and the fulcrum of its action.

In the verification procedure designed by the government, the overlap between reality judgment and value judgement transcended the epistemological limitations referred to above. According to the thesis espoused in the läroplan, when dealing with consensual themes, the school has a duty to persuade. In this area, then, compliance with the curricula does not involve verifying the impartiality of a text, but rather the opposite: compliance with the strategic objectives of the system! As the Education Minister puts it:
I believe that objectivity monitoring involves both verifying that the teaching method or material deals with the content factually and comprehensively, and that it is consistent with the “objectives and guidelines” section of the läroplan. Monitoring should therefore include ensuring that the content of the teaching method or material complies with the aims of the section\(^\text{17}\).

The procedure formalised in the early years of the LN generalised the principles that were being trialled at the same time by the Sex Education inquiry. Starting with the official mission of the school, monitoring involves systematically checking compliance with a small number of clear objectives, and with the truths that logically derive from them. The LN management board (appointed by the government and reporting to the Director-General of the Skolöverstyrelsen) was keen to remove all risk of subjectivity from the work of its experts. With the help of Westerståhl, binding criteria were adopted, to be applied mechanically when analysing the texts: in this sense they express the closed form in which the assessors (granskare) were required to assess them. Since 1974, every assessor had been handed a form that was divided up into six questions. The questionnaire steers the assessment towards the measurement of a few variables:

1. Is the space given over to various events, circumstances, points of view, etc., fairly balanced? [...]  
2. Is the presentation intentionally or unintentionally misleading? [...]  
6. Is the presentation consistent with the objectives and guidelines of the current läroplan?\(^\text{18}\)

The only thing required of the authors appears to be that they must not omit any of the demands made by society, or indeed its legitimate representatives, when it comes to teaching materials. Given the declining importance of the canonical content of the curricula (which texts, authors and historical periods to cover), critical scrutiny focuses on methodological requirements, reflecting the tone and admonitions of the läroplan. Condemning the disproportionate focus the history textbooks being examined placed on political game-playing, to the detriment of socio-economic aspects, the utredning makes a comment that reveals an expectation:

It can be seen that, in an extremely important matter of judgment, the authors have departed from the intentions of the läroplan. Other interests have proved more powerful than the läroplan (SOU, 1971, 295).

The interests in question, according to the report, are opposing “academic traditions”. These comments prompt the authors to brandish their

\(^\text{17}\) Riksdagshandlingar, Proposition 76/1973, 94.  
adherence to the methods proposed and the values underpinning them: a schematic chapter structure, reproduced unchanged by one publisher after another, appears for example, in the “social orientation” textbooks (Colla, 2017). This normalising effect is partly involuntary. Keen to dispel any suspicion of authoritarian censorship, the Skolöverstyrelsen had entrusted the evaluation tasks to independent experts: civil servants, teachers, and Westerståhl himself all worked side by side. The preordained nature of the exercise – backed up by studies on objectivity, circulars, the establishment of new criteria – empties, however, this guarantee of pluralism of all meaning. The very definition of “objectivity monitoring” is enough to overshadow all other validity criteria: scientific rigour, intellectual ambition, didactic efficacy, etc. And to undermine their legitimacy.

If we look at the impact the monitoring procedure had on the drafting of the syllabus, we see that the concern to safeguard “general” values and to prevent the spread of tendentious judgments has the same effect. The impact of “common” values is not related to the message they convey, but to the fact that they legitimise the right to “impose” that had been taken away, in the name of the moral autonomy of the pupil (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1969), from the teacher’s words and the “suggestion” of the narration. One can always reply that the few regulatory objectives allowed by the Swedish school system are innocuous, or even self-evident. But in practice, this very vagueness gives maximum discretion to those entrusted with assigning concrete meaning to oracular objectives such as “co-responsibility issues”, “solidarity”, “democracy education”. Its generic nature actually widens the scope for criticism, making any non-oriented narrative solution potentially censurable:

Page 1 shows a Tokyo street where, for some reason, not a single woman can be seen in the crowd. Why might that be?19

Within a few years, the vast majority of LN’s work involved monitoring textbook compliance with the läroplan, focusing not just on the letter of the curriculum but also on its “intentions”. Intentions that needed – as the assessment of a textbook (1990) stated – to be made “visible”. The LN would subsequently exploit its prerogative to carry out assessments on its own initiative, in order to highlight the irrefutable yet indeterminate priorities of the curricula: “issues of democracy”, “immigration issues”, “sexual roles”. Since 1974, however, its reports had recorded promising signs of a spontaneous alignment of the authors’ priority with these criteria:

These books are an interesting example of how the “Objectives and Guidelines” of the läroplan increasingly come to affect and modify content matter and factual choices in teaching materials. Little by little, knowledge for its

19 Harrie, 2009, 161
own sake is replaced by facts which, step by step, guide pupils into a discussion of a topical social problem.\textsuperscript{20}

The conformist outcome of the assessment (or the proliferation of acts of \textit{truth-telling}, in the Foucauldian sense) is all the more pervasive given politicians’ increasing insistence for schools – according to two key words of the 1979-1980 curricula – to escape from their “isolation” and to show they are “in touch with reality” (\textit{verklighetsanknuten}). Paradoxically, this insistence on cross-cutting teaching objectives also made them less stable: the sensitivity of the 1960s to dialogue with Third World countries and worker participation, or the focus of the curricula of the 1980s on disarmament, have no place in the \textit{värdegrund} of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century (which focuses instead on “democratic competence” and “cultural diversity”). The “Christian” foundation of the curricula, on the other hand, comes and goes depending on which party is in government. In 1994, Swedish “cultural heritage” became one of the values to be defended, but in a curiously individualistic sense: as a remedy for the disorientation created by globalisation. The only lasting outcome is that the focus on the present has eroded from within not just the subject matter, but also the legitimacy of the conventional distribution of knowledge. From 1980, interdisciplinary subjects (transposal of “common values”) shared the same heading as orientation subjects: the curriculum adopted in 1979 (\textit{Lgr 80}) no longer included History or Civics, which were replaced by a “temporal” or “social” perspective on given issues. For the first time, the presentation of course subjects was preceded by a list of the ultimate (individualistic and solidarity-based) objectives that they are required to serve:

“Social orientation” subjects shall enable pupils [...] to build confidence in their ability to influence and improve living conditions for themselves and for others. Pupils shall be encouraged to take part in the life of the community. [...] These studies shall promote peace efforts and strengthen awareness of the need for international solidarity (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1980).

Only Religion, characteristically, retains its own heading and its guaranteed timetable slot. Knowledge comes and goes, but the saving grace of “values” marches on!

7. Epilogue: the \textit{värdegrund} as a symptom

The affirmation of this faith would seem to represent a social need that has survived over time: this overview aims to provide a retrospective framework for the current trend towards basic reference values. Nowadays, time-

table and course liberalisation\textsuperscript{21} has derailed the rigid hierarchy of knowledge against which objectivity monitoring had raged. The central role of the textbook in education has been criticised as intrinsically conservative; pedagogical individualism has achieved new goals, such as the “teacher-free” (lärarfri) lesson, or the definition of educational objectives by the pupils themselves\textsuperscript{22}. The question is whether this outcome marks the end of a standardisation project, or the ideal environment for its achievement.

The process described here did not take place in a vacuum, nor within a stable institutional framework. It is the visible part of a battle for control of a multicultural, public, comprehensive school system, which ends at the turn of the century in the defeat of the socio-professional groups associated with the possession and replication of high-level specialist knowledge\textsuperscript{23}. Unsurprisingly, the blurring of the identity of curricular subjects went hand in hand with a decline in the importance of academic training for future teachers, initially at compulsory school level, followed by high school, until the allocation of temporary posts was fully liberalised in 1999 (Sfs 1999: 887). The school class, split apart by a myriad of optional courses, is no longer a suitable arena in which to forge an identity. This redefinition of roles – which is common to many Western countries – has, however, a profound impact on the social image of the school, as can be seen from the constant references to the education crisis, and the endless nostalgia for certain, non-negotiable values: authority criteria for which the school is considered (perhaps wrongly) the matrix. Today, as in the 1980s, politicians are once again calling for new “values”, and presenting this need as a something new: the school’s normative aphasia has become a doxa.

We can conclude by outlining a hypothesis: an other-directed school, stripped of the right to order the real (for the benefit of the market, or of the ethical State), tends by definition to see its prestige wane. But in an individualistic Regime of Truth, the only escape from the dilemma the system allows is a surplus of other-direction, with the further loss of symbolic autonomy this implies. Already in 1979, the government’s response to the educators’ crisis of authority was to set up a group of experts on “norms” (normgrupper). The title of the publication subsequently delivered to all Swedish teachers (“The school must educate!” 24 sounds like a confession of impotence: a call to reclaim the right to “influence” (påverka) pupils, limiting the pupil’s moral autonomy, was then included in the new läroplan (Lgr 80).

\textsuperscript{21} This is demonstrated by the size of the national curriculum: from 475 pages in 1962 to 16 pages in 1994.
\textsuperscript{22} In this context, it was inevitable that a bureaucratic inspection of textbook conformity would appear as an anachronism: the LN was dismantled to little protest in 1991.
\textsuperscript{23} Broady (2011) underlines the extent of a related phenomenon: the decline in status, from 1990 onwards, of the teacher training sector, and of the initial cultural capital of its students.
\textsuperscript{24} Skolan skall fostra, Stockholm, Liber, 1979.
At the time, the criticism of “the refusal to educate” and the rhetoric of “certain norms” already alluded to a dilemma that the citizen school was struggling to face head on: how might it reconcile the emancipating and assimilating objectives of the reforming tradition with the need to welcome wholeheartedly pupils with different ethnic-cultural backgrounds? How might it make tangible to these newcomers a community of values that ignores the language of myth and the sacred (and hence of limitation), and expresses itself in the name of the universal? It was precisely then that the postulates of “living together”, which the norm-gruppen struggled to name, began to be referred to as “Swedish values” in the public debate. It seems to me that the consecration of the “humanist and Christian” legacy in 1994, and the success of the värdegrund, are both consequences of this long trajectory of formalisation. On a tactical level, they represent an attempt to dent the popularity of a xenophobic right, which speculates increasingly successfully in the identity crisis of the orphans of the most ambitious welfare state in history.

The common values rhetoric has now gained an increasingly key space in the compulsory curricula discussed and approved by the Swedish Parliament25. In the drive to liberalise the list of subjects on offer, some schools either introduced “fundamental values” as a specific subject, or provided courses in ineffable “life skills” (livskunskap) – a practical introduction to managing difference and conflict (Löf, 2011). This account suggests at least one of the functions of this new totem: to perpetuate the myth of a society gathered around an unwavering attachment towards Good. The growing interest of the centralised authorities in this area – as demonstrated by the initiatives that the new education agency, Skolverket, has launched since the end of the 1990s – could be linked to the decentralisation-fuelled weakening of the direct verification and monitoring tools: centralised curricula, timetables and inspection by subject. The State, which owes its citizens a duty to deliver an efficient System, is thus prompted to define its objectives in an ideological sense – to pursue a “sensitisation” to prevailing values: responsibility for any failure will eventually lie with teachers, headmasters and headmistresses.

Finally, I would conclude with the following observation. The rhetoric of fundamental values can certainly be dressed up in many clothes, but it cannot be effective when the social structure and the irenic ethos of the model come to a clash. All its unwritten obligations – respect for the individual, which admits only emancipating values26, and peaceful assimilation, guaranteed by the certainty of participating in a community of mu-

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25 The preamble of the 2011 läroplan (curriculum) and the new national objectives for high schools (also 2011) are drafted around the värdegrund.

26 The rights of ethnic and sexual minorities and of women and children seem to be the only audible components of the official värdegrund.
ually dependent individuals – then begin to lose ground. Is the perimeter of shared values really limited to the tolerance and respect of each other’s ideas? This contradiction links the case in point with the different global experiences of overhauling the curricula, which focus on empowerment of the individual as an actor in a constantly changing cross-cultural society and present this objective both as a self-evident national priority and as an incontrovertible, science-based socialisation model (Benavot and Braslavsky, 2007). As for Sweden, current events have brought concurrent “values” to the fore. The propaganda of neo-Nazi groups in high schools, for example, against which school leaders have few weapons at their disposal (Orlenius, 2001). Since 1990, the privatisation of the school system has proceeded at an unprecedented pace, even compared to the Anglosphere (Börjesson, 2016). The growing number of private schools, with their own specific curricula and ethnic-religious profiles, heightens the tension between a harmonious social imaginary and unvarnished reality. At the same time, the question of “what do we have in common?” has become increasingly urgent, and increasingly harder to deal with.

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