

**“Sustainable consumption” as a new phase in a  
governmentalization of consumption**

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**Abstract:**

With the rise of environmental themes and the increasing support of the “sustainable development” objective, public institutions have shown a renewed interest in the sphere of consumption. During the 1990s, a new dimension in public regulation was developed for the more downstream part of economic circuits, precisely to eliminate the negative effects of consumption and to be able to subject it to criteria of “sustainability”. The initiatives taken thus far have in fact mainly targeted the population, primarily considered as a set of individual consumers. The latter are expected to become aware of their share of responsibility in the pressures exerted on natural resources and environments, and thus of the need to adapt their consumption habits in order to improve the situation. This article proposes to seize this dynamic that seems to be expanding. It examines the discursive and programmatic framework, which together redefine the role of both the consumer and the citizen to arrive at an individual who can be interested and mobilized in favor of new recommendations. It analyzes the logic from which an effort attempting to make acts of consumption conform to renewed requirements has been established in this wake. This allows for a better understanding of the institutional devices that have been favored, in particular insofar as they appear to be the result of a constrained space of possibilities.

## “Sustainable consumption” as a new phase in a governmentalization of consumption

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The rise of environmental themes and the increasing support of the “sustainable development” objective has been accompanied by the public institution’s renewed interest in the sphere of consumption. This interest, which became more and more perceptible during the 1990s, extended and made more credible the questioning which increasingly targeted activities linked to everyday consumption. Indeed, these activities found themselves associated with a large number of pressures on the environment, and were perceived as worrisome problems: an increase in resources used or incorporated, quantity of energy required, pollution, and the disposal of expired products. For each of these points, the concerns were reinforced by identifiable tendencies, *a fortiori* when they could rely on projections for the near future. Hence the image that is now widely conveyed of an economic development fuelled by consumption but engaged on a path that accentuates these pressures on the environment and therefore hardly meets the growing requirements of “sustainability”<sup>1</sup>.

Through its development, this type of descriptions and analyses has favored an evolution in the institutional understanding of consumption. This evolution can be followed through different developments, including discursive and operational ones, with which stakeholders attempted to present a repertoire of solutions in light of the environmental damage attributed to consumption practices. When applied to this set of practices, the ecological concerns have indeed supported a new dimension of public regulation that targets, in this case, the more downstream part of economic circuits. Therefore, a new phase seems to be engaged in what appears to be a larger movement of a governmentalization of consumption<sup>2</sup>. In this specific case, a new phase is emerging through “sustainable development”<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See Joseph Murphy and Maurie J. Cohen, “Consumption, Environment and Public Policy”, in *Exploring Sustainable Consumption. Environmental Policy and the Social Sciences*, edited by Maurie J. Cohen and Joseph Murphy, Amsterdam, Pergamon, 2001, pp. 3-17.

<sup>2</sup> The term “governmentalization” is used in a sense close to the one referred to by Michel Foucault, which is of interest because of the links made between government conducts and government of conducts (For an explanation, see Pascale Laborier et Pierre Lascombes, “L’action publique comprise comme gouvernementalisation de l’Etat”, in *Travailler avec Foucault. Retours sur le politique*, edited by Sylvain Meyet, Marie-Cécile Naves and Thomas Ribemont, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2005). The term “governmentalization” will be adopted particularly to designate the historical and collective process that is deployed by the grouping of rationalized interventions in the field of practices and by the development of technologies that aim to guide these practices.

<sup>3</sup> This new phase is more easily perceptible thanks to a growing number of historical or sociological works that show to what extent the roots of the state’s interest in other aspects of consumption are anchored. See for example Louis Pinto, « La gestion d’un label politique : la consommation », *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, n° 91-92, March 1992, pp. 3-19 and *Au nom du consommateur. Consommation et politique en Europe et aux États-Unis au XXe siècle*, edited by Alain Chatriot, Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel and Matthew Hilton, Paris, La Découverte, 2005.

The embodiment of this new phase can be found in the search for “sustainable consumption”, widely proposed as a sectoral component and one part of “sustainable development”. In other words, contexts related to consumption should be subject to this same line of thinking, to be coherent with the groundbreaking work of the Brundtland Commission<sup>4</sup>, a report which generally remains a source of common inspiration and often serves as a conceptual basis for reflections. At the international symposium of experts organized in Oslo by the Norwegian Environmental Ministry in 1994, “sustainable consumption” was defined as “the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations”. This is the definition that was used by the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) to support its work<sup>5</sup>.

With this impetus, consumption is not only seen as an object of intervention, but another objective is added: making consumption evolve to eliminate its negative effects and being able to subject it to criteria of “sustainability”<sup>6</sup>. Political and administrative initiatives are taking shape to justify this evolution and highlight the stakes pertaining to this issue, but also to attempt to develop operational propositions<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, levers of action are sought after so that pertinent policies can be adopted.

The initiatives taken thus far have in fact targeted the population, primarily considered as a set of individual consumers. The latter are expected to become aware of their share of responsibility in the pressures exerted on natural resources and environments, and therefore of the need to adapt their consumption habits in order to improve the situation. And in the underlying reasoning, it is the sum of these individual adaptations that should benefit the community by putting it on the path to “sustainability”. This vision has become a focal point for both activists and policy makers, who have encouraged communication and education about this issue. Campaigns led by ecological or consumer associations<sup>8</sup> have thus been complemented by more institutional actions sponsored by the state. Interventions targeting “sustainable consumption” have been able to be presented as a complementary aspect of public action in the domain of consumption<sup>9</sup>, this time with the goal of focusing on the “education” of consumers concerning new imperatives.

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<sup>4</sup> See World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987. The definition that is most often cited can be found in this report: “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 43). To sum up, the common vision of “sustainable development” is characterized by the desire to reconcile economic, ecological, and social spheres.

<sup>5</sup> See OECD, *Towards Sustainable Household Consumption? Trends and Policies in OECD Countries*, Paris, OECD, 2002, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> See Maurie J. Cohen, “The Emergent Environmental Policy Discourse on Sustainable Consumption”, in *Exploring Sustainable Consumption. Environmental Policy and the Social Sciences*, edited by Maurie J. Cohen and Joseph Murphy, Amsterdam, Pergamon, 2001, pp. 21-37.

<sup>7</sup> For a report on initiatives taken by international governmental organizations, see Doris A. Fuchs and Sylvia Lorek, “Sustainable Consumption Governance: A History of Promises and Failure”, in *Journal of Consumer Policy*, vol. 28, n° 3, September 2005, pp. 261-288.

<sup>8</sup> These practices have been used in the past, even if the stakes were different. See Joachim Marcus-Steff, “L’information comme mode d’action des organisations de consommateurs”, *Revue Française de Sociologie*, vol. 18, n° 1, Janvier-Mars 1977, pp. 85-107.

<sup>9</sup> See Lucia A. Reisch, “Sustainable consumption as a consumer policy issue”, in *The Ecological Economics of Consumption*, Edited by Lucia A. Reisch and Inge Røpke, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2004, pp. 175-189.

Introducing the notion of governmentalization of consumption<sup>10</sup> seems useful because it could be hypothesized that in the promotion of “sustainable consumption” there is a link between the evolution of common affairs management and a form of subjectivation that lies in the field of market satisfaction of certain needs and desires. In other words, the building and modeling of a consumer who might have internalized certain social roles and who would adjust his actions according to collective constraints. In the same way, by adopting the perspective of Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, it is also possible to talk about a process of translation<sup>11</sup>, which intervenes by shifting the interests of the “consumer”. Indeed, this process seems to be fuelled by the search for the possibility of a government at a distance<sup>12</sup>. That is why it is essential to understand both this process and the initiatives that are developed and implemented in order to try to make consumer attitudes and behaviors evolve. But it also needs to be re-situated with regards to a dilemma that is present in current initiatives, without necessarily being formulated: managing to discipline consumers without disrupting the dynamics of consumption that is supposed to fuel economic growth.

Going down this path leads to the introduction of a methodological point: to be understood, the identifiable institutional initiatives must be re-placed in the evolutive system of which they are a part. This means that the goal of the investigation is to distance itself from the analytical separations that are too readily available. It is better not to continue to treat observable activities as if they were in separate categories (politics, economics, etc). This would mean potentially distorting the possibilities of understanding the evolutions. On the contrary, concerning “sustainable consumption”, what seems to come under a governmentalization of consumption should be seen as an element that has its place in a much larger organization. Therefore, it would not be very productive to take this case as an example to go back to the debate on the withdrawal or the return of the state, since the state action is taken in a network which goes beyond it and on which it largely depends for its structure and orientation. Understanding this point appears to be even more important because this new phase of governmentalization of consumption seems to be deployed in conjunction with a process of rationalization of the production-consumption system, which is itself engaged in efforts to adapt in view of the imperatives of “sustainable development” that are increasingly presented as strategic challenges.

The objective of this article is to better understand the expansive dynamic that is present in France, the main field of investigation, but also on a larger scale, from the institutional sphere to much

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<sup>10</sup> Considering also that the institutional evolutions are largely linked to the deployment of a “governmentality”, to reuse a conceptual angle from the authors who developed the perspective formulated by Michel Foucault. See Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality. Power and Rule in Modern Society*, London, Sage Publications, 1999 ; Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Present. Administering Economic, Social and Personal Life*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2008. The advantage of such an approach is that it allows forces, political rationalities, programs, discursive supports, practices and technologies by which the activities of the government are constructed, organized, and deployed, to all be held together and structured in an analysis.

<sup>11</sup> See Michel Callon, “Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay”, in John Law (ed.), *Power, Action and Belief. A New Sociology of Knowledge?*, London, Routledge, 1986, pp.196-223; Bruno Latour, *Science in Action. How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1987. Such a process contributes to both putting problems of different realms in the same context and reorganizing the network of individuals that could participate in solving the problem. In this process in which the intermediaries used in a more or less material form are numerous, Michel Callon distinguishes four steps that could overlap: problematization (interdefinition of actors and definition of obligatory passage points), devices of intersement, enrolment, and the mobilisation of allies.

<sup>12</sup> One point of interest regarding the framework of analysis proposed by Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller is that it targets precisely this type of overlapping between logics of government at a distance and logics of translation, which encourages a combination of the perspectives of Michel Foucault and those of Michel Callon and Bruno Latour. See Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller, “Political Power beyond the State: Problematics of Government”, *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 43, n° 2, June 1992, pp. 173-205 (reprinted in *Governing the Present*, op. cit.).

larger social spheres<sup>13</sup>. To accomplish this goal, this article will firstly examine this process, starting with the underlying basis, that is, a discursive and programmatic framework<sup>14</sup> which together redefines the role of both the consumer and the citizen to arrive at an individual who can be interested and mobilized in favor of new recommendations. It will analyze the logic from which an effort attempting to make acts of consumption conform to renewed requirements has been established in this wake. This will allow for a better understanding of the institutional devices that have been favored, in particular insofar as they appear to be the result of a constrained space of possibilities.

## **I) The development of a programme of government that aims at mobilizing citizens**

The increase in challenges linking consumption and “sustainability” imperatives has not only reinforced arguments that favor initiating general efforts to adapt, but has also more and more frequently associated prescriptions with concerns. These discursive productions have had a tendency to lay the groundwork for intervention and to be transformed into programmes of government<sup>15</sup>. A framework of action is therefore built based on a problematization that allows explanations to be structured about the work to be done, the reasons for the work, and the specific actors to be targeted in order to carry out the changes deemed necessary.

### **a) The construction of the citizen’s role and the search for devices of mobilization**

For consumers, appeals to become aware of the ecological situation became stronger and stronger during the 1990s: there was an increase in messages to highlight the fact that consumers were no longer supposed to ignore environmental problems. Through the process of problematization that has been set up, consumers even saw that they had been given a co-responsibility in the creation of these problems, and logically, in the implementation of solutions to solve them<sup>16</sup>. Out of a large discursive assemblage that attempted to increase public awareness of the environmental challenges came invitations with various degrees of urgency to reflect upon the consequences of purchasing and consumption. In this problematization supported by both politico-administrative actors and environmentalists<sup>17</sup>, there is a renewed understanding of the role of each individual. In the space for discussion that has developed, a large range of discourse has more frequently called upon the citizen to get involved in a form of ecological civic engagement. When they have been applied to the

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<sup>13</sup> This dynamic is all the more expansive that it proves to be supported by a growing number of discursive intermediaries (brochures, booklets, reports, articles, internet sites, etc.) and artefactual intermediaries (labels, signs, etc.) which are used in the following analysis as an open corpus.

<sup>14</sup> A more complete comprehension of the discursive dimension can help to link the field of thought and practice, as in the approaches inspired by Michel Foucault. See Liz Sharp and Tim Richardson, “Reflections on Foucauldian Discourse Analysis in Planning and Environmental Policy Research”, *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, vol. 3, n° 3, 2001, pp. 193-209.

<sup>15</sup> The framework of analysis proposed by Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller allows the importance of this programmatic dimension to be highlighted when social groups are subjected to forms of government. See “Political Power beyond the State: Problematics of Government”, op. cit. As the authors specify: “Programs presuppose that the real is programmable, that it is a domain subject to certain determinants, rules, norms and processes that can be acted upon and improved by authorities. They make the objects of government imaginable in such a way that their ills appear susceptible to diagnosis, prescription and cure by calculating and normalizing intervention” (ibid., p. 183).

<sup>16</sup> Bente Halkier reminds readers that this responsabilizing tendency concerning the consumer is perceptible on a large scale and can also be found in a number of European countries. See Bente Halkier, “Consequences of the Politicization of Consumption: the Example of Environmentally Friendly Consumption Practices”, *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, vol. 1, n° 1, 1999, especially p. 25-26.

<sup>17</sup> For an expert point of view, see for example Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World 2004. Special Focus: The Consumer Society*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

domain of consumption, the impulses to reduce pressure from human activities on the environment have progressively contributed to the construction of a hybrid entity: that of the “citizen consumer”.

This role has been promoted through the use of a true argumentative line of thought, first of all in an environmental perspective, then more and more in the context of “sustainable development”, as this issue developed. This issue has gained nearly worldwide recognition, having been addressed in different ways, thanks to international awareness initiatives such as “Earth Day” (a worldwide event since April 22, 1990). One of its recurring messages has been that each citizen could play a part in “saving the planet”. The rise of the “sustainable development” theme reinforced the idea that the success of this movement depended on the interest of the citizen and that appropriate measures had to be taken to ensure its success. From the general propositions put forward at the Earth Summit (the United Nations conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in June, 1992), to those assembled in official national reports, as well as the works of the OECD, a stream of thought and texts can be followed<sup>18</sup> and facilitate the adoption of this double perspective as if it was evident. As a result, it has been regularly integrated into frameworks of thought in works that are supposed to guide French politics, like the National Strategy for Sustainable Development from Jean-Pierre Raffarin’s government<sup>19</sup> or the multi-stakeholder process of the “Grenelle de l’environnement” after the election of Nicolas Sarkozy as President of the Republic (notably in the workgroup number 4: “Adopt sustainable modes of production and consumption”).

Whether the actors are in the realm of politics, administration, or the environment, the challenge seems to justify the construction and the promotion of a state of general and permanent mobilization. In the arguments deployed, consumers see themselves as being assured of receiving compensation for their efforts, in this case, the promise of improved collective conditions of living. The problem tends to be perceived and presented in such a way that the necessary change requires the majority of the population to cooperate. As a result, the evolution of consumption practices towards “sustainable development” does not seem to be attainable unless individuals accept to make the necessary changes. In other words, they must be able to consider these efforts to be not only legitimate, but also credible in terms of the expected effects. Without this form of confidence, the bringing about of changes in behavior becomes more difficult to imagine.

The effectiveness of this reasoning also tends to be linked to another condition, especially from an institutional point of view. Indeed, the context used is not one of sacrifice: if the general intention is to assign roles to the population, notably so that citizens internalize the need to change their behavior, this challenge does consist of showing to each person that their choices, both collective and individual, will not cause a decrease in the quality of life, but could even increase it in the long term.

By reimagining the act of consumption in such a way as to reintroduce the element of the citizen and the dimension of responsibility, in the end the programme of government tends to direct the modalities of intervention towards influencing, destined to encourage support for the outlined model. In the domain of consumption and beyond, the ADEME (French Environment and Energy

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<sup>18</sup> See Maurie J. Cohen, “Sustainable consumption in national context: an introduction to the symposium”, *Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy*, vol. 1, n° 1, Spring 2005, pp. 22-28.

<sup>19</sup> This is one of the objectives put forward by the French government on a large scale during the first governmental seminar for sustainable development on November 28th, 2002 : “For sustainable development to truly be at the heart of public policy, **the citizen** himself, an essential actor of this approach, must be aware of the challenges and feel **responsible** for this problem. And yet to be able to play this role efficiently and with conviction, the citizen must be **trained and informed**, know what sustainable development is, understand the importance of the interactions between the economic, social, and environmental domains, and consider the consequences of his actions and everyday choices” (“Thème 4 : Information, sensibilisation, éducation, participation du public”, in *Séminaire gouvernemental sur le développement durable*, Dossier d’information, Service d’information du Gouvernement, 28 November 2002, p. 66, present author’s translation). Bold face text in original document.

Management Agency) has positioned its action as if it was a question of instilling a spirit of citizenship, by displaying a strong ambition: “Enrich the idea of citizenship: this is the vocation of the communication campaign launched by the ADEME for the general public.

These actions have two objectives:

- draw citizens’ attention to complex issues;
- offer citizens practical perspectives, explaining what concrete and everyday actions can be taken to lead to sustainable development.

To this end, the ADEME regularly launches national information and awareness campaigns in the media<sup>20</sup>. Consumer awareness, information, and education are part of a reasoning that becomes almost undisputed. In the propositions that have been developed, this conception is put forward in such a way that it allows both the group of subjects to rally together and the strategies to put into place to be characterized. In this case, as the consumers are interested and informed, they must be able to become agents of change.

### *b) A process of conforming consumption acts to renewed standards*

It is in fact the manner of consumption rather than the consumer that is targeted. The steps being considered, or those taken, have a tendency to support the hypothesis (more or less explicitly formulated) that a causal chain can be identified and activated: it is the consumers’ ability to change their practices that should allow for certain excessive pressures on the environment to be remedied.

For example, this was one of the conclusions that came out of the 7<sup>th</sup> European Consumer Day, organized by the European Economic and Social Committee on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2005. This event, whose theme was “sustainable development”, brought together about one hundred representatives from European institutions and the “civil society” (family and consumer associations, employer organizations, unions, professional associations, NGOs, etc.), and emphasized as a common viewpoint the necessity of collective reflection and discussion about the means needed to encourage individuals to more readily choose sustainable products and services. In his closing remarks, Bernardo Hernández Bataller, President of the specialized section “Single market, production, and consumption” of the European Economic and Social Committee, encouraged “the promotion of sustainable products and services”, but also “the promotion of new shopping habits”: “A change in social habits and individual behaviour must also be encouraged, to promote the consumption of more sustainable products and services, making the general public more responsible and demanding with regard to the sustainability of goods and services consumed<sup>21</sup>.”

In discussions that combine the issues of consumption and “sustainable development”, the view that is generally agreed upon is one of encouraging an ecological consumerism. Consumers should be encouraged to question themselves. When consumers purchase, they are expected to know how to discriminate between products, which leads to the question of the means they need to carry out this task. One viewpoint has developed which tends to communicate to consumers that they have the choice and that this choice can have significant consequences. It is therefore suggested that the citizen consumer adjust his/her choices in accordance with new and superior principles, precisely those which are included in the category of “sustainable development”.

Many reflections have been developed to figure out how to help populations adopt this new behavior. At the OECD, one part of the reflections was oriented towards education. In this perspective, two departments of the OECD, the Environment Directorate and the Centre for

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<sup>20</sup> “Campagnes de communication”, <http://www2.ademe.fr/servlet/KBaseShow?sort=-1&cid=96&m=3&catid=12439>, accessed on January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006 (present author’s translation).

<sup>21</sup> European Consumer Day “Sustainable consumption”, 15 March 2005, European Economic and Social Committee, Brussels.

Educational Research and Innovation, worked together and organized a “workshop” which was held in Paris on September 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, 1998. This “workshop” on “education and learning for sustainable consumption”<sup>22</sup> brought together the expertise of about sixty representatives of international, governmental, associative, and professional organizations (18 member states were represented) to discuss the challenges of incorporating the environmental concerns into teaching. The objective was “to examine how education and learning can contribute to promoting more sustainable consumption patterns”<sup>23</sup>. The contribution of schools and other learning environments has been identified, notably for the knowledge they could bring and the support they could give to the adoption of practices that appear to be exemplary.

In France, the National Sustainable Development Strategy, adopted in June, 2003, also proposes to “help the consumer become an actor in sustainable development”<sup>24</sup>. The text is based on the hypothesis that the role of consumers must be redefined: “The role of consumers is decisive and can not be ignored. Up to now it has been underestimated and underexploited. That is why the present national sustainable development strategy proposes strong actions to profoundly rebalance the issue of economic activities”<sup>25</sup>. And in this perspective, the nature and the quality of the information they receive appears to be a crucial variable.

The attention granted to the information dimension can also be found in the logics underlying the the creation and the functioning of the association Consodurable. Created on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2004, this association is in fact a state organization, created jointly by the Secretary of State for SMB, commerce, artisans, liberal professions, and consumption, and the Minister of Ecology and Sustainable Development. The association was created with the objective of “providing information to consumers about products or services that respect sustainable development, and creating synergies between consumer-actors and businesses to favor new, voluntary engagements to support sustainable development”<sup>26</sup>. The association communicates via its internet site (<http://www.consodurable.org>), online since June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2004. The project aims to inform consumers about purchases, an idea that the president of the association, Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet, who is also a member of the National Assembly representing the department of Essonne and General Delegate of Ecology for the UMP party (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire)<sup>27</sup>, supports from a pedagogical point of view: “We hope to offer the general public a place where they can obtain information about everyday products in an open manner. Our role is pedagogical, our goal is to help consumers find information about a specific product that they would like to buy, and discover the range of products of a specific brand in this sector”<sup>28</sup>. When the theme of “sustainable consumption” was chosen as the general interest campaign for 2005 by the Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the association Consodurable was entrusted with its coordination, and with the same perspective of educating the general public about this issue.

Given this more or less structured set of efforts, a whole network of initiatives tends to be organized and laid out around a way of establishing the complicity of the consumer-citizen, who is called to

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<sup>22</sup> The workshop led to the publication of a document with the same title: OECD (Environment Directorate / CERI), *Education and Learning for Sustainable Consumption*, Paris, OECD, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> “Foreword”, *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> See “Aider le consommateur à devenir acteur du développement durable”, in Comité interministériel pour le développement durable, *Stratégie Nationale de Développement Durable*, 3 June 2003, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3 (present author’s translation).

<sup>26</sup> Renaud Dutreil, Secretary of State for SMB, commerce, artisan, liberal professions, and consumption, during his opening remarks of the Constitutive Assembly. The passage appears on the Internet site, on the home page of the “purpose of the association” ([http://www.consodurable.org/assoc\\_objet\\_detail.php?id=2](http://www.consodurable.org/assoc_objet_detail.php?id=2)).

<sup>27</sup> In June, 2007, she was named Secretary of the State in charge of Ecology in the second government of Prime Minister François Fillon.

<sup>28</sup> Also found on the home page of the “purpose of the association”, [http://www.consodurable.org/assoc\\_objet\\_detail.php?id=2](http://www.consodurable.org/assoc_objet_detail.php?id=2) (present author’s translation).

become a “consum’actor” (“consomm’acteur”). In this case as well, the strategies deployed have proven to be supported by a common hypothesis of intervention: if consumers receive pertinent information and if they have the possibility to choose alternative products that are available, they can in fact show a gesture of good will and modify certain purchasing habits to comply with new standards that meet the objective of “sustainable development”. Since what is being promoted and communicated tends to be closer to new norms of consumption that also imply standards of behavior. What is being proposed could also be called a training in “good” consumption, with a line of reasoning that has more or less of a moral undertone. In fact, different public institutions and organizations tend to describe themselves as moral authorities, for example, the Ademe (French Environment and Energy Management Agency), which claims to be able to answer questions such as “How to make the right choices?”<sup>29</sup>.

In addition, the discursive set that has been constituted has a tendency to encourage action to be taken. It is this proactive dynamic that the Ademe pushes, by classifying possible consumer actions: “Act: you can limit your impact on the environment

- through your choices, by selecting these products;
- through your behavior, by changing it;
- through your implication, by sorting packaging and other used household items for waste upgrading”<sup>30</sup>.

Mass retailing companies tend to support this movement. On one part of its Internet site (<http://ecocitoyen.auchan.fr/>), Auchan proposes “More than 100 solutions for taking action”<sup>31</sup>. The adoption of this theme by mass retailing companies represents another relay for communication and it is the same programme of government that finds itself promoted even by the economic actors who supply the main consumption outlets.

### *c) From general mobilization to “small gestures”: a dynamic of penetration in everyday behavior*

In this discursive set, a link between wide-ranging challenges and everyday actions has also been formed. These two contexts have been connected since the 1990s and the resurgence of ecological challenges. In a series of government campaigns, the realm of everyday activities has been solicited to be included in collective goals linked to the defense of the environment<sup>32</sup>. By extension, an increasing number of spokespersons have taken up the theme of “sustainable development” and related topics by using the same levers that seem exploitable in the context of everyday life.

For example, in October 2006, the Minister of Ecology and Sustainable Development launched a campaign entitled “Ecology needs all of us”. With a goal of mobilizing the population, the campaign aimed to encourage general awareness of two major challenges: the fight against global warming and preserving biodiversity. Yet again, it is the “general public” that is targeted, with the intention of making behavior evolve towards “sustainable” behavior. After a call for tender, the minister entrusted the campaign to Publicis Consultants, a communications consulting agency. It proposed a slogan for the campaign, “a catchphrase used in all forms of media communication for

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<sup>29</sup> On the page “Particuliers” under the heading of “Développement durable” on the site of the Ademe, <http://www2.ademe.fr/servlet/KBaseShow?sort=-1&cid=96&m=3&catid=12396>, accessed on January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> *Devenir éco-consommateur, acheter et consommer mieux*, ADEME, March, 2004. Can also be found on the Internet site of the Ademe ([http://www.ademe.fr/particuliers/Fiches/achet\\_et\\_conso/index.htm#](http://www.ademe.fr/particuliers/Fiches/achet_et_conso/index.htm#), accessed January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Site accessed May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Among the numerous campaigns, see for example the one about saving energy launched at the beginning of the 1990s by the British government and analyzed by Steve Hinchliffe. In the campaign the same lines of reasoning that have been widely communicated can be found (highlighting global implications of local actions, etc.). See “Helping the earth begins at home. The social construction of socio-environmental responsibilities”, *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 6, n° 1, April 1996, pp. 53-62.

the campaign” and tried to show that even actions that appear to be insignificant can be important: “each action is important when there are 60 million actors”. This is what is explained in the agency’s press release when the campaign was launched: “To respond to this societal and environmental issue, the agency recommended creating a link between global challenges and everyday concerns by encouraging each citizen to participate in his own way, and see these themes as being relevant rather than “distant”. The choice of an approach that was both pedagogical and thought-provoking was done”<sup>33</sup>. These intentions were communicated in two television commercials to explain the two challenges (one commercial for global warming and another for biodiversity) and six radio advertisements that were more specifically destined to present examples of “useful gestures” (three advertisements for global warming and three others for biodiversity). An internet site was created to complement the campaign and provide information and explanations about these “simple gestures”. The site proposes a heading “Why and How to act?”, further complemented by fact sheets that present “the right gestures” (for example, “Making your own compost, a solution that is easy, economical, and ecological”).

Easy to understand and apparently easy to implement, the solution of “small gestures” has also been used in a number of countries and is currently defended not only by politico-administrative actors, but also by activists (ecological associations, etc.). For institutional actors, the solution allows them to avoid directly dealing with the question of ways of life and more structural constraints which could influence consumption habits. The objective is that these “small gestures”, which are supposed to be easy to adapt because they are close to what is done everyday, become routine practices and make their effect known by their accumulation.

## **II) Models of action reveal guiding rationalities**

The programme of government that has been put in place is oriented towards intervening in both social and economic activities. Its construction and deployment are carried out with the support of a group of rationalities that work together and give direction to the chosen strategies. Through these strategies, a certain level of understanding of the population is revealed, a population that is considered to be a group of subjects with characteristics and dispositions that appear to be able to be influenced. It is a process by which the identity of the “good” consumer is almost laid out.

### **a) A transitive model of action**

The consumer appears to be an intermediary link in the dynamic to stimulate. In fact, the approach is indirect (more precisely defined as including the participation of intermediaries) and transitive: it is a question of making consumers change in order to make producers change. In other words, this model is about trying to influence the supply via the demand and manage to make “market signals” appear. Commercial and industrial strategies of businesses are expected to seek an adjustment to the preferences and choices of consumers, who are themselves supposed to have an ability to influence the market. In short, it is the supply that is supposed to adjust to the demand, in this case, adjust to a more “responsible” demand.

In this schema, the consumer is no longer passive and thus tends to acquire a new role in the purchasing process. Consumers are expected to express their preference for products which conform to the idea of “sustainable development”, which are more respectful of the environment,

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<sup>33</sup> Press release, “Lancement de la campagne du ministère de l’Ecologie et du Développement durable, sur le changement climatique et la biodiversité signée Publicis Consultants », Paris, 2 October 2006 (present author’s translation).

and which are more attentive to the application of minimal social criteria. This should then encourage producers and distributors to meet these expectations. It is this type of reasoning that the French government's National Strategy for Sustainable Development has adopted: "In an economy that is open to competition, the buyer, and especially the final consumer, has the power to influence modes of production. Through the products and services s/he chooses to favor, s/he can affect the ecological footprint that s/he leaves on the environment. Our citizens, who are more and more aware of this issue, must be able to choose having a full knowledge of the facts"<sup>34</sup>.

The basis for the reasoning of this model of action therefore allows a link to be created between an individual's activities, which are apparently banal, and more general effects. It also has a tendency to justify government intervention to strengthen the process, notably by actively participating in informing the consumers.

To function, this schema needs the confidence of the consumers: the role that is defined only offers them the possibility to make hypotheses about the effects of their choices, effects that will not necessarily be immediately visible and could take time to become apparent. In such a schema, the implication of the consumer is dependent upon the hope s/he can have: the hope that not buying a certain product or preferring another product will have some effect on the economic circuit at an early stage. This can lead the consumer to believe that businesses have the possibility to adapt, but they do not or have not yet, for reasons that may appear mysterious and that institutional or economic actors hardly seek to explain.

#### b) An individualizing model of action

What this discursive construction proposes is also a rather individual manner to respond to the problems raised. Even if the problems are collective, going through the sphere of consumption tends to shift the handling of these problems towards a model of action that is more founded on individualization. Michael Maniates has shown to what extent this process of individualization is already largely at work in the creation of solutions that have been proposed concerning the environmental challenges<sup>35</sup>. This process is found here in a format that targets each individual as a consumer, in such a way as to convince him or her that changing his or her personal habits can lead to more substantial changes. The attention remains on the demand, with a reasoning that tends to consider that the choices of consumption and the acts of purchasing are essentially of an individual nature. The shift from the individual level to the collective level is made while supposing that the influence of consumers can be cumulative.

This conception has important consequences in the way in which it guides the interventions and the selection of levers of action: indeed it has a tendency to separate the consumption practices from the framework of structural constraints that can influence them. By eliminating the larger elements from the context, these implicit hypotheses lead to a lower level of understanding, as Paddy Dolan also points out: "Consumer practices are cultural and social practices that have historically developed and are manifestations of both local and global linkages of social interdependencies. To continually look at the consumer as the cause of the ecological problem effectively decontextualizes

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<sup>34</sup> Comité interministériel pour le développement durable, *Stratégie Nationale de Développement Durable - Les objectifs*, 3 June 2003, p. 8 (present author's translation).

<sup>35</sup> See Michael Maniates, "Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?", *Global Environmental Politics*, vol. 1, n° 3, Summer 2001, pp. 31-52. Reprinted in *Confronting Consumption*, Edited by Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates and Ken Conca, Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press, 2002.

consumption acts from such interdependencies. It posits a macro problem onto a micro situation and seeks the solution there”<sup>36</sup>.

### c) A responsabilizing and encouraging model of action

As stated above, a complementary approach is deployed in the form of a call to consumers to be responsible and aware. In this logic, the reduction of pressures on the environment and the collective well-being are dependent on making individuals responsible. This vigilance would need to be maintained on a daily basis by becoming “an eco-consumer every day”, as is encouraged by the Ademe in one of its mini-guides<sup>37</sup>.

The work of making consumers responsible is also structured around encouraging more reflexivity, notably when making purchases. The challenge would be to teach consumers to see the world that is behind the product<sup>38</sup>. In other words, a new state of mind would be necessary to allow consumers not to forget that each product corresponds to certain production conditions. This argument is defended starting from the homepage of the Internet site of the association Consodurable by its president, Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet: “Each time we go shopping, we make choices regarding products, prices, and quality; but we are also buying the working conditions of those who produce, the conditions of manufacturing, evolution, and destruction of products, and thus their impact on the planet. Every purchase has a direct influence on the environmental and social conditions of production. When you buy a product, you also buy everything that goes with it...”<sup>39</sup>

### d) A rationalist model of action

The models of action being considered all have a tendency to adopt a point of view that makes purchasing and the consumer’s choice an action that is essentially (or even uniquely) governed by rationality. These hypotheses seem to be largely accepted in the institutional discourse and they are in accord with the majority of specialized literature (at the crossroads of management, marketing, and psychology) about “green consumption”<sup>40</sup>. The consumer tends to be mainly considered as a rational individual, like an information processing system, analyzing information that he or she is given, reading labels and information on packages. Hence the setting of a schema of intervention that highlights the need to make up for a deficit of information and makes it an important step before the intervention of rationality allows for changes in behavior.

If this rationalist model were to be carried out, a large part of the improvements in the situation would play out in the supermarket and hypermarket aisles. This stimulated rationality could bring about a change in behavior when the consumer makes a decision about purchases, when faced with the supply of products. To this end, the different media used in communications often include pictures of situations that guide consumers in their thought process.

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<sup>36</sup> Paddy Dolan, “The Sustainability of “Sustainable Consumption”, *Journal of Macromarketing*, vol. 22, n° 2, December 2002, p. 171.

<sup>37</sup> See “Éco-consommateur tous les jours”, in Ademe, *Devenir éco-consommateur, acheter et consommer mieux. Les actes d’achat*, March, 2004.

<sup>38</sup> To use the expression coined by Klaus Toepfer, the executive director of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). See UNEP News Release NR99-90, 23 August 1999. This same reasoning is used and developed by Bas de Leeuw (Head, Strategy Unit, Production and Consumption Branch, United Nations Environment Program) in “TheWorld Behind the Product”, *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, vol. 9, n° 1-2, 2005, pp. 7-10.

<sup>39</sup> Present author’s translation.

<sup>40</sup> See Anja Schaefer and Andrew Crane, “Addressing Sustainability and Consumption”, *Journal of Macromarketing*, vol. 25, n° 1, June 2005, especially p. 79.

This rationalist orientation encourages consumers to make a personal effort according to a logic of calculability, more and more through the promotion of media resources that can help consumers to be calculatingly rational. A whole set of strategies has been developed by actors who do not belong only to the institutional sphere. For example, the Internet site of the French railway company SNCF [www.voyages-sncf.com](http://www.voyages-sncf.com), with the support of the Ademe, has proposed since October, 2006 an “EcoComparateur” that allows consumers to calculate not only the differences in cost and travel time for different modes of transportation (airplane, train, car) for the same trip in France and in Europe, but also the “Environmental Index” that corresponds to the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions for each available solution. Along the same lines, the Gifam, a group of appliance manufacturers (Groupement Interprofessionnel des Fabricants d'Appareils d'Equipement Ménager), launched the site [www.eco-calcullette.fr](http://www.eco-calcullette.fr) at the beginning of 2007 where consumers can evaluate the cost of use of appliances and their energy efficiency, and obtain tips for their usage.

The principle of comparing already exists with the “energy efficiency label”, which is required by the European Union for appliances (refrigerators, freezers, washing machines, dryers, dish washers, etc.), light bulbs, cars, and more recently, for housing<sup>41</sup>. The goal of this system is to enable consumers to compare the energy efficiency of products thanks to a classification system of colors, and letters ranging from A to G, A being the most energy efficient and G being the least efficient. This information is supposed to be an aide for consumers and it was designed as a way to guide them in their choices.

These types of systems, apparently insignificant, discipline consumers in the sense that they encourage users to question themselves. The rather strong behavioral guidelines that they communicate are accompanied by symbolic reward messages, which more or less explicitly express to consumers who accept to change their behavior that “what you are doing is good”. However, the process of activating a certain type of rationality, which would no longer be only about the price, still faces some challenges: how to integrate these relatively new criteria into consumer choice processes, especially since choice making is not a homogeneous process and consumers can arrive at decisions through different thought patterns<sup>42</sup>.

### **III) Influencing choices: self-restricting technologies of government**

All of this work directed towards consumers is dependent on a series of operational strategies. These strategies, by which the governmentalization of consumption progresses, have the particularity of intervening more or less directly in the world of commerce and exchange relations. But, given the care taken with regards to the mechanisms of the market, they tend to intervene in a way that could seem limited and even self-restricted, in such a way that consumers find themselves to be an adjustable variable.

#### **a) Creation and circulating of intermediaries to mobilize the consumer**

In order to spread the word to consumers, intermediaries are needed. The term used here is justified because they indeed come between the consumer and the product. These intermediaries provide the media and act as vectors for “informational politics”, to use the expression coined by Nick Clarke,

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<sup>41</sup> See Isabelle Rey-Lefebvre, “Une étiquette énergie pour les logements”, *Le Monde*, 26 October 2006.

<sup>42</sup> As demonstrated by Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier, who identified three ideal-typical patterns: routine, selection, and deliberation. See “De la routine à la délibération. Les arbitrages des consommateurs en situation d'achat”, *Réseaux*, vol. 24, n° 135-136, 2006, pp. 253-284.

Clive Barnett, Paul Cloke and Alice Malpass<sup>43</sup>. The increasing publication of practical guidebooks and other informational brochures can not go unnoticed<sup>44</sup>. Their informative nature is often supplemented with recommendations, which propose practical solutions to changing habits and present what should be done and what should not be done, and what should or should not be purchased<sup>45</sup>.

Their titles are explicit. The Ademe has proposed and updated a small guide entitled “Becoming an eco-consumer: Buying and consuming better”<sup>46</sup>. The Minister of Ecology and Sustainable Development has also published a guide, addressing nearly directly each individual (“My daily green gestures”<sup>47</sup>) and also a series of guides with recommendations adapted to different situations (“at home”, “at the office”, “when I travel”, “in my garden”, “on vacation”, “with other people”). There are even small pedagogical guides for children, such as “The little ecologist and his 1001 summer gestures”, published by the Minister of Ecology and Sustainable Development<sup>48</sup>.

These guides are proposed as a first step towards changing consumer behavior, as a way to acquire a skill that allows each individual to better understand the choices to be made. It is in this context that the Ademe promotes its small guide, using a mobilizing tone: “Join the ranks of the eco-consumers who are saving the planet. All you have to do is be interested in the manufacturing and the composition of the products that you buy. To think about the best way to use them. And to also think about its end-of-life...”

**Get involved by following the advice in our guidebooks and diagnostics”<sup>49</sup>.**

As far as practical proposals are concerned, these intermediaries are very close to the many books that have been published since the 1990s for readers who would like to consume ecologically or responsibly. Indeed, this has almost become a fully fledged editorial and commercial niche, with a series of titles that propose “everyday green gestures”<sup>50</sup>, solutions for “buying responsibly”<sup>51</sup>, or even how to save the planet<sup>52</sup>. The advice and reasoning to justify them are usually drawn from the same repertory.

The same type of discursive collection can be found with consumer associations and other related organizations who publish informational intermediaries that serve as guides. The magazine “60

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<sup>43</sup> See Nick Clarke, Clive Barnett, Paul Cloke, Alice Malpass, “Globalising the consumer: Doing politics in an ethical register”, *Political Geography*, vol. 26, n° 3, March 2007, especially p. 237-238.

<sup>44</sup> They have also been published for other aspects of consumption (health, safety...). Leaflets and informational brochures for consumers have also been designed by professional organizations and refrigerator manufacturers to specify the conditions in which to use the fridge, notably in order to limit the risks of microbe development. See Evelyne Derens, “Campagnes d’information vis-à-vis des consommateurs : Chaîne du froid”, *Revue générale du froid*, vol. 91, Oct. 2001, pp. 66-68.

<sup>45</sup> The series of examples given by Nick Clarke, Clive Barnett, Paul Cloke and Alice Malpass prove that this phenomenon also exists in the United Kingdom (op. cit., p. 237-238).

<sup>46</sup> *Devenir éco-consommateur. Acheter et consommer mieux*, Ademe, October 2002.

<sup>47</sup> *Mes éco-gestes au quotidien*, Minister of Ecology and Sustainable Development, June 2004, p. 14

<sup>48</sup> *Le P’tit Ecolo et ses mille et un gestes de l’été*, Minister of Ecology and Sustainable Development, July, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Under the heading “Espace Particuliers” of the site of the Ademe, on the page entitled “Agir”, <http://www2.ademe.fr/servlet/KBaseShow?sort=-1&cid=96&m=3&catid=14290>, accessed on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007 (present author’s translation).

<sup>50</sup> See Thierry Thouvenot and Gaëlle Bouttier-Guérive, *Planète attitude. Les gestes écologiques au quotidien*, Paris, Seuil, 2004 ; Karen Christensen, *Un geste écologique par jour ... pour sauver notre planète*, Le Courrier Du Livre, 2005 ; Philippe Bourseiller, Anne Jankéliowitch, *365 Gestes pour sauver la planète*, Editions de la Martinière, 2005 ; Sabine de Lisle, *La journée de l’écocitoyen. Un guide pour préserver l’environnement*, Bordeaux, Sud Ouest, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> See Milène Leroy, *Guide du consommateur responsable*, Marabout, 2001 ; Elisabeth Laville, Marie Balmain, *Achetons responsable ! : Mieux consommer dans le respect des hommes et de la nature*, Paris, Seuil, 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Dominique Glocheux, *Sauvez cette planète ! Mode d’emploi. Pour agir : 512 gestes simples et attitudes douces*, Paris, Jean-Claude Lattès, 2004 ; Roberto Rizzo, *Sauver le monde sans être Superman. Les gestes écologiques au quotidien*, Paris, Belin, 2006.

million consumers” (60 millions de consommateurs) published a special issue with similar advice on 50 fact sheets (how to isolate your house, how to heat your house using renewable energy, how to save water, driving better while consuming less, carpooling, riding your bike again, decoding labels, choosing tap water rather than bottled water, etc.). The National Institution for Consumption (Institut national de la consommation) took advantage of financial backing from the European Union and the cooperation of other consumer associations, the Italian Adiconsum and the Spanish Confederación de consumidores y usuarios, CECU, to produce its own document for consumer associations as well as the larger population called “The responsible consumer’s guide” (*Le guide du consommateur responsable*).

These publications and the guidelines they contain found another intermediary for distribution thanks to the Internet<sup>53</sup>. The main organizations have set up internet sites where they can reproduce at a lower cost the documents and the texts they aim to publish. These themes have also benefited from increasing media coverage, in newspaper articles<sup>54</sup>, in certain radio shows (“Service public” on the radio France Inter for example) and television programs (“Consomag” produced by the National Institution for Consumption on the TV channels France 2 and France 3).

The intermediaries are diversifying, and even punctually taking on a human form, that of mediators on commercial sites. During the “Sustainable development week” in 2007, nearly 100 Carrefour stores participated in this national public awareness campaign by welcoming volunteers from WWF (World Wildlife Fund), who proposed to clients to calculate their “ecological footprint” and give them advice on the “right gestures” and a “Little guide to buying responsibly” book.

All of these intermediaries are looking for transformational efficiency, firstly by making the theme of “sustainable development” known and trying to make the public aware of its implications. This is a line of reasoning that is more and more frequently used to justify their intervention. For example, in the decision adopted by the Economic and Social Council during its Wednesday, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2007 session (“Consumption, trade, and changes in the society”), it proposed “a full acceptance of sustainable development”, and “to lead a pedagogical action for the clients”, in this case through different means such as guides, catalogues, advertising, guided tours, making information available on commercial sites... By extension, it is also expected that consumers modify their conditions of judgment. In addition to the messages of awareness, these strategies also include, in a more or less precise way, criteria for judging products or their conditions of use. It is through the internalization of these criteria by each individual that these important problems can hope to be better understood. All things considered, the hearing or the receiving of these intermediaries hardly appears to be problematized. However it is probable that these texts, which are distributed in different forms, are more in demand and more favorably received by people who are already aware of the situation<sup>55</sup>.

#### b) Re-equipping the commercial setting and subjecting operational devices to their realm of intervention

Other devices try to intervene more directly in the commercial setting. The objective of the different forms of labeling is to inform the consumer, but using the product as a support<sup>56</sup>. In this type of

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<sup>53</sup> For a more general view of the potential role of the Internet in redirecting consumption modes, see Lucia A. Reisch, “The Internet and Sustainable Consumption: Perspectives on a Janus Face”, *Journal of Consumer Policy*, vol. 24, n° 3-4, December 2001, pp. 251-286.

<sup>54</sup> See for example “Quand le consommateur a rendez-vous avec la Terre” and “Adoptez l’écocattitude !”, *Marianne*, n° 519, March 31st to April 6th, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> As explained by Nick Clarke, Clive Barnett, Paul Cloke and Alice Malpass (op. cit., p. 237).

<sup>56</sup> For a detailed explanation and an analytical perspective of the foundations on which ecological labelling is based, see Magnus Boström and Mikael Klintman, *Eco-Standards, Product Labelling and Green Consumerism*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

approach, it is a question of being placed in a universe of signage that is already very inundated, in order to attract the consumer's attention by making the potential consequences of the consumption of certain products visible. The reflections and propositions that have come out of institutional decisions concerning the environment, such as the National Strategy for Sustainable Development in France have encouraged a continuation of this strategy: "On a daily basis, when consumers buy a product, they are engaged by different types of labeling. While there are hundreds of private logos, the official labels which can offer the consumer certain guarantees remain largely unknown and little used. It is therefore necessary to inform the buyer (the State, local governments, businesses, consumers) of the impact that the products they buy have on sustainable development"<sup>57</sup>. This solution was again pushed for in the workgroup number 4 ("Adopt sustainable modes of production and consumption") in the "Grenelle de l'environnement".

This type of proposition tends to lead to a form of semiotic strategy. Along these lines, thanks to new inscriptions, consumers should be able to find new ways that allow them to distinguish between products. The National Strategy for Sustainable Development defines the objective on a more operational level: "making the products on the market more clear and informing the consumer". It gives this explanation: "it is important for the consumer to be perfectly informed about what is covered under the green label. Professional trade and artisan organizations, the chambers of commerce and industry, and consumer associations will be encouraged to participate. What needs to be done is to inform consumers by including a label on products about sustainable development, as the proportion of products with this label is still limited"<sup>58</sup>.

This line of propositions marks an attempt to adjust the equipment of the market setting, in this case, by working on modalities of supply specifications that can have consequences on the demand. The intention is to get a process underway in which the demand could become likely to retroactively have an effect on the supply. This means of communication which is supposed to help consumers make choices builds a link between the visual comprehension and the cognitive understanding that can take place in the framework of encountering products. Beyond the informative aspect, equipping commercial settings is also a way to guarantee consumers that they can have confidence in products which carry labels. In return, however, this type of schema obliges consumers to learn and remain aware.

If these means of communication do encourage a governmentalization of consumption, they do it with a relative margin. Most often in the advanced conceptions coming from institutions, the means to provide a capacity to regulate only appear to be defensible if they do not interfere with market mechanisms, and in any case, only if they can deal with the latter cautiously. The means that are used, which are essentially oriented towards informing and making consumers aware, allow for the possibility to respond to this type of constraint: they seem to permit a form of intervention on certain functions of consumption and the market without risking to damage their dynamics and without being subjected to accusations of excessive interventionism.

Logically, the targets are situated more in the context of demand. It is the demand that must be guided in a non-constraining manner by finding appropriate intermediaries. Likewise, the goal of the association Consodurable is one of accompanying: "By offering the general public transparency

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<sup>57</sup> Interministerial committee for sustainable development, *Stratégie Nationale de Développement Durable - Les objectifs*, 3 June 2003, p. 8 (present author's translation).

<sup>58</sup> Comité interministériel pour le développement durable, *Stratégie nationale de développement durable : programmes d'actions*, 3 June 2003, p. 29.

about everyday products, Consodurable guides consumers through the maze of logos and labels and proposes information about products or responsible businesses”<sup>59</sup>.

The actions of institutional communication are therefore brought to the same ground as marketing for businesses. This is the case when radio or television advertising is used to broadcast general messages. This is also the case, though on another level, for labels. The semiotic competition can explain the necessity for campaigns promoting green labels, such as those organized each year since 2003 by the Minister of Ecology and Sustainable Development, in cooperation with AFAQ-AFNOR Certification<sup>60</sup> and the Ademe.

*c) A particular mode of role and responsibility distribution : the consumer as the weakest link*

In the end, the deployment of this re-equipping also tends to constrain the weakest link, that is, the consumer, this representation of a collective actor enrolled with the assurance that it will not dare contradict the extensive program undertaken in the name of public interest. Who would be the actor likely to have a fundamental role in each stage of a product’s lifecycle? As it appears in the majority of discourses, it is apparently the consumer, despite the limited number of ways he or she can intervene in the conception of products. It is this central role that the Ademe tries to convince the consumer of in its informational brochures: “Encouraging a reduction of the impact products have on the environment, during the whole lifecycle of a product is essential. In this process, the consumer is a primary link. From the moment a product is purchased to the product’s end-of-life, the consumer can act to contribute to the quality of the environment. Being a “green consumer” begins in the store, carries on at home or at work, and continues at the trash can and recycling bins”<sup>61</sup>.

Indeed, the system of dependence that consumers are most often a part of is made less visible by this line of reasoning. The possibility to revise their modes of consumption, even if they are “non-sustainable”, can be limited by the constraints that come into play at an infrastructural level and limit, in a way, the conditions of choice<sup>62</sup>. Each consumer is obliged to take into account the offer that is available, but this offer could limit his decision to purchase alternative products. The potential evolution of the products offered could thus become a condition for the consumer to accept this new moral burden: the “sustainability” of his purchasing habits.

From this point of view, the technologies of government that are developing also implicitly correspond to a distribution of efforts which are to be made, thus extending in another way the socio-discursive processes of distributing responsibilities. For authors such as Timothy W. Luke, the “green consumerism” that is promoted participates in transferring the moral burden from the producers to the consumers. Precisely, he shows how ecological guidelines that are communicated via “green consumer guides” and other “ecological handbooks” contribute to such a shift<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Factsheet “Intégrer le développement durable dans les modes de production et de consommation », in Ministry of Ecology and Sustainable Development, *Stratégie nationale de développement durable*, September, 2005 (present author’s translation).

<sup>60</sup> Result of the merger in 2004 of the l'Association française pour l'assurance qualité (AFAQ) and the Association Française de Normalisation (AFNOR).

<sup>61</sup> Ademe, *Devenir éco-consommateur, acheter et consommer mieux. Les actes d'achat*, March, 2004, p. 7 (present author’s translation).

<sup>62</sup> See Christer Sanne, “Willing consumers—Or locked in? Policies for a sustainable consumption”, *Ecological Economics*, vol. 42, n° 1-2, August 2002, pp. 273-287.

<sup>63</sup> See Timothy W. Luke, “Green Consumerism: Ecology and the Ruse of Recycling”, in Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka (editors), *In the Nature of Things. Language, Politics and the Environment*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 154-172.

In this shift, the discourse directed at consumers tends to have a clearly directive tone. It is not only a question of informing consumers, but of training them as well. By increasing ways of raising awareness and education, the equipment installed functions as a support for a distributed reflexivity<sup>64</sup>, but without the symmetry of this reflexive charge being guaranteed by the producers and distributors, in other words, where the offer is formulated. Technical and commercial choices are also important, just as the referencing practices are. From a governmental point of view, the difficulty lies in intervening in chains of production and distribution that appear to be more and more international<sup>65</sup>. In this context, acting on the demand could seem to be more accessible than acting on the offer, because of the worldwide dynamics involved in organizing the circuits of production and commercialization. In fact, longer and more complex circuits make the search for regulations more arduous.

Having the demand more accessible does not necessarily make the problem easier to solve. As the strategies are put into place, the actors who promote them have also been able to remark difficulties and resistance. For example, the work of the OECD has been able to highlight the risks of submersion and dilution of the information communicated: “However, there are a number of barriers to effectively providing information to consumers and linking this information to action. These barriers are related to the growing volume and complexity of environmental information available to consumers, consumer scepticism vis-à-vis the credibility of most information sources, and “free-rider” decision-making dilemmas - all in the context of a broader information and media environment that generally encourages indiscriminate consumption”<sup>66</sup>. Moreover, studies that were carried out at the request of public organizations show that efforts still have limited results, for example concerning the changes in the relationship of the population with waste: “Households are mostly worried about waste management when the waste is produced, while they are less concerned about reducing waste at the source: only 17% declared that they pay attention to the quantity of waste that products would generate when they purchase products. Nearly 4 out of 5 households do not believe that the mass of household waste is increasing, findings that are also confirmed by the Ademe”<sup>67</sup>.

Moreover, individuals are not expected to have a very developed level of reflexivity. If the issue at hand is making consumers responsible, consumers are not asked to have a critical conscience, in any case, not to go as far as questioning the “consumer society”, as certain ecologist discourses can do. In the proposed schema, the problem that is put forward is more about the type of consumption and not about the level of consumption itself.

Behind the promotion of a “sustainable consumption”, the modalities of the governmentalization of consumption thus seem to conform to the adaptive potential of the economic system. The rectification of disadvantages of consumption even tends to be a re-legitimization of consumption, especially with the involuntary help of consumers (when it is a question of this effect), that is, without consumers truly knowing about the process to which they are contributing.

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<sup>64</sup> This is made possible because the equipment and the technology used also contribute to a distributed cognition. For further information about this idea, see for example Bernard Conein, “Cognition distribuée, groupe social et technologie cognitive”, *Réseaux*, n° 124, 2004, pp. 53-79.

<sup>65</sup> See Doris A. Fuchs, Sylvia Lorek, “Sustainable Consumption Governance in a Globalizing World”, *Global Environmental Politics*, vol. 2, n° 1, February 2002, pp. 19-45.

<sup>66</sup> “Towards Sustainable Household Consumption? Trends and Policies in OECD Countries”, *Policy Brief* (OECD), September, 2002, p. 8-9.

<sup>67</sup> Cédric Planchat (Director of Economic Research and Environmental Assessment, Ministry of Ecology and Sustainable Development), “Protéger l’environnement : un objectif pour une grande majorité de Français”, *Insee Première*, n° 1121, January, 2007 (present author’s translation).

#### **IV) Dynamics of consolidating a governmentality and areas of tension**

The objective of “sustainable consumption” causes that a programme, a rationality, and technologies of government directed towards the same goal tend to assemble. Precisely, it is a logic of governing conducts that seems to be gaining ground and even going as far as targeting certain behavioral factors of consumption. However, as the encompassing strategy develops, this extension also meets other structural logics, notably those of the economic system, and it therefore becomes susceptible of creating areas of tension.

##### *a) A form of governmentality that finds new areas of investment*

The field signposted by the expression of “sustainable consumption” can be seen from an angle of “governmentality” that adapts, in other words, one that is, on the one hand, capable of incorporating new challenges and on the other hand completed by relatively new strategies. In order to rectify certain disadvantages originating from the system of consumption, a regulating aspiration that allows the population to participate and makes the population a force and lever of intervention has taken shape. The increasing number and apparent dispersion of intervention sites make distance actions more efficient, thanks to the development and promotion of behavioral norms that are supposed to cover behavior from a personal to a collective level. Access points are searched for in individual practices, so that individual behaviors can be modified with the consent and participation of each consumer, without seeming to affect the freedom of choice.

The means that are implemented and more or less coordinated are carried out according to the mode of diffuse penetration, but it may not be reduced to a unique and all-encompassing intention. The challenge seems to justify that all the areas (commercial sites, household, advertising, etc.) can be a vehicle for transmitting the message, so that the population can discern the way to take and can adapt attitudes and practices that allow consumption to become “sustainable”. This programme of government is extending to a new rationality that is proposed to each consumer, who is individually called to join the movement and treated as an individual who is expected to behave responsibly.

The introduction of the “sustainable development” issue in the realm of practices also fuels a need for new knowledge about the population. This governmentalization of consumption goes hand in hand with solicitations or attempts to integrate works from the scientific field, such as psychology<sup>68</sup> or sociology, that appear to be useable. This research is thus drawn towards a pragmatic perspective, since it is a question of understanding consumer behavior and the factors that can influence it, so that the behavior can be adapted. Nick Clarke, Clive Barnett, Paul Cloke and Alice Malpass see in this research another side of informational politics that is implemented in this renewed consideration of consumption<sup>69</sup>. Indeed, the intention is to produce information about consumers. This work of acquiring operational knowledge is fuelled by quantitative research (surveys, etc.) or qualitative research (focus groups, etc.) that can be mobilized to help understand the current evolutions and the future efforts to be made<sup>70</sup>. The deployment of these investigations,

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<sup>68</sup> For a more complete explanation about a relatively recent field of investigation, see Robert Gifford, “Environmental Psychology and Sustainable Development: Expansion, Maturation, and Challenges”, *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 63, n° 1, March 2007, pp. 199-212.

<sup>69</sup> See Nick Clarke, Clive Barnett, Paul Cloke, Alice Malpass, “Globalising the consumer: Doing politics in an ethical register”, op. cit., especially p. 238-239.

<sup>70</sup> The Crédoc (Centre de Recherche pour l’Etude et l’Observation des Conditions de Vie) is part of a group of organizations, closely linked to the administration, that carry out this type of research. See for example Patricia Croutte, Franck Delpal, Georges Hatchuel, *Représentations et pratiques de la consommation engagée. Évolution 2002-2006*, Cahier de recherche n° 231 du Crédoc, December 2006, and, for a condensed version, Franck Delpal, Georges Hatchuel, “La consommation engagée s’affirme comme une tendance durable”, *Consommation et modes de vie*, n°201, March 2007.

as evidenced by the growing number of reports, summaries, conferences, and academic publication, is another way to create a new type of consumer, by looking for traces of new attitudes and behavior in the research results<sup>71</sup>.

The observable tendency in the promotion of “sustainable consumption” is close to the larger tendency revealed by Nikolas Rose that he qualified as “new politics of behavior”, or in shorter terms “ethopolitics” by adopting a perspective close to that of Michel Foucault regarding the rise of “biopolitics”<sup>72</sup>. With the term “ethopolitics”, Nikolas Rose targets a body of techniques that developed by impregnating individual behavior and having a tendency to absorb it in a government of behavior that justifies itself on ethical terms<sup>73</sup>. From an operational point of view, “sustainable consumption” appears to be the medium of expression for this same form of apparently original power, that is an integral part of everyday life: “[...] ethopower works through the values, beliefs, and sentiments thought to underpin the techniques of responsible self-government and the management of one’s obligations to others. In ethopolitics, life itself, in its everyday manifestations, is the object of adjudication”<sup>74</sup>.

Indeed, the problematization of “sustainable consumption” tends to evolve by going back to cultural aspects (beliefs, values, etc.), with the idea that the latter also influence consumption behavior. The goal of these approaches and initiatives is to achieve a possible requalification of the way in which consumption can claim to bring about happiness. Purchasing can remain possible and consumers can continue to do this ordinary activity with a clear conscience, as long as they adopt “responsible” attitudes.

The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) has also begun to target lifestyles, in this case by promoting green lifestyles that can be qualified as “cool”. To achieve this goal, the UNEP launched in 2003 an initiative that no longer targets only the consumer, but attempts to move upstream by reaching the mass retailing and fashion industries. This project, which is also part of the general mobilizing strategy described above, as expressed in its title (“Shopping for a better world”), claims to put “an emphasis on marketing "attractive" or "desirable" life-styles as a key way to sell environmentally friendly products”<sup>75</sup>. The words of Klaus Toepfer, the executive director of the UNEP, are more clear, since according to him, the goal of the operation is “to show how sustainable life-styles can be fashionable and 'cool' as young people might say”<sup>76</sup>. In this perspective, allies were sought out in the targeted sectors to serve as relays that should “bring environmental messages to a new and increasingly influential audience”<sup>77</sup>. As far as the distribution sector is concerned, Klaus Toepfer has found a justification: according to him, this sector “is in a unique position to help the public to adopt more environmentally friendly lifestyles and purchasing habits by providing customers with an appropriate choice”<sup>78</sup>.

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<sup>71</sup> From this point of view, the strategy is not necessarily different from those which have developed in the field of marketing. For elements of comparison, see Peter Miller, Nikolas Rose, “Mobilising the Consumer: Assembling the Subject of Consumption”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 14, n° 1, 1997, pp. 1-36. For an explanation that is closer to a reflexive exercise on this type of work, see also Eva Heiskanen, “The Performative Nature of Consumer Research: Consumers’ Environmental Awareness as an Example”, *Journal of Consumer Policy*, vol. 28, n° 2, June 2005, pp. 179-201.

<sup>72</sup> Nikolas Rose, “Community, Citizenship, and the Third Way”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 43, n° 9, June/July 2000, pp. 1395-1411.

<sup>73</sup> In fact, his vision targets more the “Third Way” defended in the United Kingdom by the *New Labour* party of Tony Blair.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1399.

<sup>75</sup> “Shopping for a better world”, UNEP News Release, Brussels/Paris/Nairobi, 2 June 2003.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* The project began with an informal meeting in Paris where ten organizations with an interest in the distribution sector were represented. (Ahold Corporate Communications, British Retail Consortium, Carrefour, Co-op, EuroCommerce, Ito Yokado, Kesko, Monoprix, Pinault Printemps-Redoute, Safeway).

b) Unanswered questions and areas of tension from a selective intervention

This phase of governmentalization of consumption does not have a systematic character. On closer examination, the theme of “sustainable consumption” marks a selective attention and the underlying logics explained above also contain their share of unanswered questions or strategies of avoidance that can reveal a certain number of potential areas of tension. As previously explained, a potentially heavy cognitive and moral weight tends to be placed on the consumer and the question is then to know how far each individual can go to accept this weight. In addition, the reverse side of using an individualizing focus is placing more systemic phenomena out of sight which could weaken individual efforts. Therefore, there is also a question of modalities of distribution of responsibilities. All the more so because the call for consumers to be more rational puts them in an awkward position compared to an economic system in which the satisfaction of desires is increasingly emphasized.

The initiatives taken thus far have taken a gamble on the reflexive capacities of individuals in their consumption practices. All the work of equipment previously reported on is also a way to encourage this reflexivity, precisely through devices almost aiming at covering and marking out the space of personal choices. In what domains do advice and recommendations develop? They develop principally in contexts that have already been prepared and equipped with existing initiatives. For example, strategies to encourage consumers to pay more attention to energy consumption can be more easily deployed because a system of information is already in place (with energy labels for example) and such a system of information can offer potential cognitive hooks for people who pay attention to the recommendatory messages.

On an individual level, however, the reception of these recommendatory messages remains dependent on a complex set of motivations. Information overload phenomena and attention span saturation have been investigated in different studies<sup>79</sup>. The act of encouraging consumers to adopt “sustainable consumption” is still in competition with external demands that come from more or less direct forms of commercials and advertising that each individual is surrounded by on a daily basis. To have a minimum level of effectiveness, the messages that support “sustainable consumption” must manage to remain visible amidst the continuous flow of information (similar to the environmental and social labels among a series of logos and other commercial signage<sup>80</sup>). Before personal actions are taken or even imagined, the challenge of these initiatives is to manage to catch the attention of consumers and, in such an environment, this means that the consumer accepts to spend time or make an effort to gather information and weigh up possible choices<sup>81</sup>.

As it has been discussed, the dominant strategy involves targeting principally the consumer, either at home or at the time of purchase. It is difficult for such a strategy to affect other variables that are not part of the individual sphere. The evolution in technologies used in the home setting can, for instance, progressively lead to real changes in behavior. In the case of appliances, they can have an effect that is not limited to their unit energy consumption. The microwave is thus an interesting example. In everyday life, this appliance has been more and more frequently used to defrost and this new use has contributed to forming an increasing demand for frozen foods. This evolution in

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<sup>79</sup> See Johanna Moisander, “Motivational complexity of green consumerism”, *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, vol. 31, n° 4, pp. 404-409.

<sup>80</sup> This supposes that a consumer has the ability to see the difference between pretensions that are serious and those that are not. See Alison Grace Cliath, “Seeing Shades. Ecological and Socially Just Labeling”, *Organization & Environment*, vol. 20, n° 4, 2007, pp. 413-439.

<sup>81</sup> See Josée Johnston, “The citizen-consumer hybrid: ideological tensions and the case of Whole Foods Market”, *Theory and Society*, vol. 37, n° 3, June 2008, pp. 229-270.

practices has not only fuelled a new market, but it has also produced the need for additional energy, precisely for the production, distribution, and storage of the newly proposed products<sup>82</sup>. Studies about this type of example show that the formulation of the demand does not depend solely on the products offered, but it is also connected to practices and expectations that can evolve. In certain cases, like the latter, they can evolve by being restructured by the penetration and the generalization of technological innovations in everyday life.

In addition, the evolution of the “demand”, this manifestation of the mass of consumers who are supposed to express in the “market”, can hardly be understood without also considering the attempts to “manage” consumers’ purchases that accompanied and fuelled the increase in economic activity<sup>83</sup>. The large amount of advertising and marketing expenses prove that strong efforts have been made to stimulate this “demand”<sup>84</sup>, if need be, by encouraging new types of desires. Certain sectors seem to owe their development more to an “organized dissatisfaction”, as Christer Sanne stated, and this situation tends to be maintained by a series of interests, particularly economic ones, that can benefit from the continuing development of the production-consumption system<sup>85</sup>.

The confrontation between persistent logics of marketing and the logics of “sustainable consumption” thus proves to be full of potential areas of friction, since the forces behind them can be so divergent. These logics aspire to control the behavior of consumers, but they do this from different starting points. As a result, commercial settings find themselves targeted by forms of “management” of the demand that can be in competition with each other. On the one hand, there are logics whose goal is to reinforce or encourage needs<sup>86</sup>. On the other hand, other logics attempt to have consumers adopt a more “responsible” attitude. The situation can be one in which more or less underlying tension is produced, insofar as the objective of “sustainable development” sets a responsabilizing process into motion, in a rationalist schema, in an economic system that has an increasing tendency to function by affecting desires, even trying to manipulate them<sup>87</sup>. Producers and distributors are in fact rather inclined to encourage impulse buying. The result can be a potentially problematic relationship between (individual) desire and a form of (external) pressure. If the messages become strongly prescriptive, consumers can experience the criteria associated with “sustainable consumption”, for example respecting the environment, as being like an obligation, and therefore more or less consciously as obstacles to fulfilling their desires, even if the latter are more or less spontaneous.

In this context, it could be ambitious or questionable to rely on consumers’ ability to think about the totality of their practices. The desire to reflect on one’s own needs and the way to satisfy them only seems to appeal to a very small minority of the population of industrialized nations. The progression

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<sup>82</sup> Research by Elizabeth Shove and Dale Southerton has highlighted the effect of this driving force. See Elizabeth Shove, Dale Southerton, “Defrosting the Freezer: From Novelty to Convenience”, *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 5, n° 3, 2000, pp. 301-319.

<sup>83</sup> The idea of “management of demand” is left in quotation marks, given the intensity of this terminology and the many debates it continues to provoke. In these terms, the phenomenon is analyzed as a key element in a fundamental economic mutation by the American economist John Kenneth Galbraith, notably in *The New Industrial State*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967.

<sup>84</sup> This has effects that seem to be empirically identifiable, especially from an environmental point of view. See Robert J. Brulle, Lindsay E. Young, “Advertising, Individual Consumption Levels, and the Natural Environment, 1900–2000”, *Sociological Inquiry*, vol. 77, n° 4, November 2007, pp. 522-542.

<sup>85</sup> See Christer Sanne, “The Consumption of our Discontent”, *Business Strategy and the Environment*, vol. 14, n° 5, August 2005, pp. 315-323.

<sup>86</sup> The actors in the marketing industry know from experience that these “needs” are not natural and they can be worked on to be transformed into a commercial market to be exploited, as Jean Baudrillard has already attempted to show by analyzing “the system of needs and of consumption as a system of productive forces” (See “The Ideological Genesis of Needs”, in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, St. Louis, Telos Press, 1981).

<sup>87</sup> On this point and for a larger perspective, see Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History. The Global Transformation of Desire*, London, Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2006.

of post-materialist values remains a largely controversial hypothesis and the hope of seeing consumers evolve in this direction can appear to be optimistic in the short term. The development of discount stores is proof of a tendency for consumers to look for low prices<sup>88</sup> and, given the effect of this driving force, the pressure on prices can be reflected on the chain that goes from production to consumption, precisely by recreating a series of negative consequences (pressure on working conditions, neglecting environmental aspects, etc.)

Moreover, it is more a form of inappropriate consumption rather than an overconsumption that is targeted in the most common propositions<sup>89</sup>. The government authorities remain in an ideological framework that favors a global increase in consumption, especially during times in which economic growth seems to be slowing or pointing to signs of a future recession<sup>90</sup>. The financial mechanisms of consumer loans and credit card payments have also developed and contribute to fuelling this movement<sup>91</sup>. Even if individual behavior is supposed to evolve, these structural orientations remain largely prevalent.

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Given the institutional support in favor of “sustainable development”, is there a renewed form of government being applied to consumption? In fact, consumption is integrated as an essential link in the general mobilization in favor of what is supposed to be a new and great collective goal. It is considered to be a field of intervention that can be subjected to corrective actions, whose challenge is to reduce the undesirable effects that it seems to bring on. In fact, it is the population that turns out to be targeted, since all individuals are understood to be consumers. Strategies are developed and are deployed in the attempt to have consumers adopt attitudes and behaviors which are appropriate, that is, changing their habits in such a way that they can adopt and internalize a new set of recommendations.

It is for this reason that the notion of governmentalization of consumption has been developed in this article, or at least a new form of it, insisting on the fact that it is not only carried out by the state or public authorities. Among the devices and intermediaries used, a large part is produced, as it has been discussed, outside of the politico-administrative sphere. However, they all have a common characteristic: targeting the consumer on an individual level while treating the population as if it were a nearly homogeneous entity. In a more or less precise way, depending on the intermediary, but in any case for the whole of the population, a normative framework is put into place and communicated, one that resembles a code of conduct that different lifestyles are supposed to measure up to. The success of this process thus tends to be associated with the possibility to produce individual measures that are more in compliance with the objective of “sustainable development”. In light of this objective, apparently ordinary activities, such as making purchases and using a product, lose their innocent nature in favor of the promotion of a reflexive form of

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<sup>88</sup> See Pascale Hebel, Nicolas Fauconnier, Morgane David, *La nouvelle sensibilité des consommateurs aux prix*, Cahier de recherche n° 215 du Crédoc (Centre de Recherche pour l'Etude et l'Observation des Conditions de Vie), November, 2005.

<sup>89</sup> Doris A. Fuchs and Sylvia Lorek observed that the actors of the business world disregarded this question during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. See “Sustainable Consumption Governance: A History of Promises and Failures” op. cit., p. 273-274.

<sup>90</sup> See Allan Schnaiberg, David N. Pellow, Adam Weinberg, “The Treadmill of Production and the Environmental State”, in Arthur Mol and Fred Buttel (eds.), *The Environmental State Under Pressure*, Amsterdam, Elsevier Science, 2002, pp. 15-32.

<sup>91</sup> See Maurie J. Cohen, “Consumer credit, household financial management, and sustainable consumption”, *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, vol. 31, n° 1, January 2007, pp. 57-65.

participation in the “consumer society” (The latter is only criticized in the most radical discourses<sup>92</sup>, since this reflexivity appears to be rarely considered beyond the particular domain of “responsible” and “sustainable” behaviors). In other words, citizen-consumers are expected to exercise a form of self-control, so that they can demonstrate discernment, provided that they have been correctly made aware and informed of the issues. Therefore, the lever is not one of restraint, but the stimulation of a motivation, which is particular because it must be assimilated to a form of obligation, but without it being experienced as an obligation.

Indeed, the discursive arrangement that extends and carries this theme assembles a double logic: making consumers feel guilty and making them not feel guilty. On the one hand, there is what has become preferable not to consume or not to do. On the other hand, there is the idea that there is no harm in consuming if each individual pays attention. Such a logic is also likely to generate a paradoxical situation, considering the economic system the consumers are a part of and the mentalities that this everyday environment can produce. The motor behind this system seems to consist of encouraging or even exacerbating the desires that are likely to be satisfied through making purchases<sup>93</sup>. And yet, the most frequent demand made to consumers about becoming “responsible” is rather the equivalent of asking them to control their desires. From this point of view, “sustainable consumption” evokes more of a dissonance to be resolved.

The theme of “sustainable consumption” also tends to form a connection between the private sphere and the public sphere, but rather by blurring the border between them. Consumers are given the hope that their private actions will have larger effects beyond their domestic realm. But at the same time, consumers are asked for a subjective adaptation towards objectives that they can not master and which are not necessarily theirs.

Likewise, the theme of governmentalization of consumption is capable of putting in another perspective what certain studies have labelled as a “politization of consumption”<sup>94</sup>, since it also has the role of a form of depolitization as related to the political challenges that consumption could be a part of (in terms of dependence, conditioning the consumer, or what was formerly called alienation and manipulation of needs<sup>95</sup>). As an institutional product, the issue of “sustainable consumption” tends to create a sort of mix between socio-economic challenges and moral challenges.

Symptomatically, emphasizing “small gestures” also removes the question of big choices. After all, consumers can equally ask themselves questions about responsibilities that are beyond their

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<sup>92</sup> When consumption is considered to be potentially political, this critical component proves to be principally defended by militant groups whose radical position remain the minority in discussions on this subject. See Johanna Moisaner and Sinikka Pesonen, “Narratives of sustainable ways of living: constructing the self and the other as a green consumer”, *Management Decision*, vol. 40, n 4, 2002, pp. 329-342.

<sup>93</sup> For further information about the “libidinal economy” specific to “hyperindustrial capitalism”, see Bernard Stiegler, *De la misère symbolique. Tome 1. L'époque hyperindustrielle*, Paris, Editions Galilée, 2004.

<sup>94</sup> For more information about the issue of the increase in ethical and political justifications for certain purchasing behaviors, see for example Dietlind Stolle and Marc Hooghe, “Consumers as Political Participants? Shifts in Political Action Repertoires in Western Societies”, in Michele Micheletti, Andreas Follesdal and Dietlind Stolle (eds.), *Politics, Products, and Markets. Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present*, New Brunswick, Transaction Press, 2003, pp. 265-288 ; Dietlind Stolle, Marc Hooghe, Michele Micheletti, “Politics in the Supermarket: Political Consumerism as a Form of Political Participation”, *International Political Science Review*, vol. 26, n° 3, 2005, pp. 245-269.

<sup>95</sup> This theme sparked a large number of publications, of which certain books have become almost classics, that have been able to serve as sources of inspiration and critical support for more politically committed positions: for example *The Consumer Society. Myths and Structures* by Jean Baudrillard (London, Sage, 1998), *One-Dimensional Man* by Herbert Marcuse (Boston, Beacon Press, 1964). The latter distinguishes between “true” from “false needs”. For a recent publication about this theme, see for example Conrad Lodziak, *Manipulating Needs. Capitalism and Culture*, London, Pluto Press, 1995. An article by Thierry Paquot attempts to give a panoramic view of this critical line of thought: “De la “société de consommation” et de ses détracteurs”, *Mouvements*, n° 54, June-August 2008, pp. 54-64.

perception<sup>96</sup>. They can accept the moral burden of making choices when purchasing products, but they can also ask themselves if it would be simpler to only have to choose from products that respect the environment or that were produced in acceptable social conditions to choose from<sup>97</sup>. Behind the imperatives received on a personal level, a distribution of responsibilities is also at stake, which can create forms of dissidence if it is perceived as too unequal. In this case, individual consumers could refuse to play their part in a situation in which they consider themselves to not be globally responsible. In any case, whereas the population is not expected to leave the vast network of the “consumer society”, consumers of this population are expected to change the way in which they participate, by adapting their everyday practices.

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<sup>96</sup> Studies done with group interviews in the United Kingdom have demonstrated this type of reaction. See Alice Malpass and Clive Barnett and Nick Clarke and Paul Cloke, “Problematizing choice: responsible consumers and sceptical citizens”, in *Governance, Consumers and Citizens. Agency and Resistance in Contemporary Politics*, Edited by Mark Bevir and Frank Trentmann, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

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