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Article

# From Consumerism to the Empowerment of Consumers: The Case of Consumer Oriented Movements in France

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**Abstract:** Political consumerism was developed during the 19th century and expanded at the turn of the century through social movements aimed at empowering civil society in the market. Many of these movements succeeded in building power on the consumption side. Today, we still witness several forms of political consumerism. This contribution explores the possibilities and limits of consumer involvement in sustainable consumption. The main finding of this study of the political organization of consumers is that the market may not be the only arena for changing consumer behavior. Instead, social constraint and political empowerment seem to be rather more efficient.

**Keywords:** political consumerism; sustainability; consumption

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## 1. Introduction

Since the World Summit for Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in 2002, consumption has been stressed as one of the main issues that developed countries should focus on. States and Non Governmental Organizations have started to mobilize consumers towards a more responsible behavior and have attempted to rely on consumers to achieve more sustainable societies. States and NGOs claim that individual decisions of consumption should be reframed and should focus more on concerns about the decisions' impact on the environment. Consumers are identified as primary agents of environmental change today [1,2], and most sustainable consumption policies are aimed at regulating the consumers' individual choices to orient them towards sustainability [3]. The policies either focus on consumers' waste production or their energy consumption, by providing consumers market

incentives or information to make them choose more eco-friendly products. Taxes, educational campaigns, or labelling schemes are the major policy tools of sustainable consumption policies [4].

Most of the relationships between consumption and sustainable development issues have been framed through political consumerism by public actors [2,5,6]. Michele Micheletti proposed a systematic analysis of contemporary political consumerism as a combination of both the public and the private role of consumers, which reconciles the tradition of public virtue in politics with its private virtue. It means that consumers are also citizens, who choose their products in accordance with private preferences and public principles. For Micheletti, political consumerism also provides new modes of expressing involvement in public life through more flexible, network-oriented, and hands-on arenas that allow consumers to combine their daily lives with political concerns. Yet, even though many surveys show that consumers may be highly receptive to ethical or environmental issues, as evidenced in the development of fair trade awareness as an example, evaluations of changes in consumer behavior tend to be misleading.

This framing puts a lot on consumers' shoulders, and in the meantime, ignores some aspects of consumption patterns that cannot be reduced to individual choices. Other scholars working on sustainable consumption issues, have also emphasized the collective aspects of consumption decision; making a plea for a reframing of sustainable consumption to include its social and collective dimensions [4,7-9]. Consumption patterns are social practices that cannot be reduced to individual choices [10]. These patterns are deeply rooted in collective norms and provisioning systems [9-11]. What could be the relationship between these processes of building norms and political consumerism? Can the consumers' involvement in sustainable development issues contribute to a form of political consumerism that cannot be reduced to individual choices (even though having collective effects), but which could have normative and collective dimensions?

This paper aims to question the relationships between consumption and sustainable development by assessing the consumers' role and involvement as collective, rather than as individual, actors. For this purpose, we need to go back to the history of political consumerism to show that activists, through political consumerism protests, have always contributed to the re-framing of consumption practices and the construction of the consumers' responsibility. Historians have provided several pieces of evidence, which suggest that political consumers have taken several forms. Political consumerism is a longstanding form of collective action. It was developed during the 19th century, with the cooperative movement, and expanded at the turn of the century through various social movements aimed at empowering civil society in the market [12]. Many of these movements succeeded in building power on the consumption side, and were able to achieve certain goals that are not simply related to consumer advocacy [13]. For example, consumers were mobilized by trade unions to circumvent difficulties encountered in strike actions during the 1910s, or to support workers' struggles during the 1950s in the United States [14]. In other situations throughout the 20th century, up until the present day, consumers were called on to support many different causes, from civil rights advocacy, to the defence of social justice, or the protection of the environment. Consumers have thus been built up over time as a political and social force that cannot be ignored.

In political science literature, political consumerism is considered to be a new phenomenon that came from the post-modern critics of society via a network oriented activism. This activism tries to articulate the political concerns involved with everyday life activities [1,2]. It will be shown that

political consumerism is as old as market society and that it is deeply rooted in activism that aims at involving consumers in protest activities. These activities are meant to reshape norms, with respect to consumption, in order to include new concerns about civil rights, working conditions, and environmental protection. By putting the analysis of the building of sustainable consumption norms within the larger historical context of political consumerism, one can understand the contribution of social protest in the genesis of new norms. But, as was shown by historians, several types of political consumerism always occur simultaneously: some try to target individual consumers and their purchasing power, others aim to build collective power through protest actions; some are very critical, others accept some kind of institutionalization. These different forms of political consumerism still exist today, and they contribute differently to the genesis of new norms with respect to sustainable consumption. Some types, such as those of fair trade organizations, still target the individual responsibility of consumers. These receive a great deal of media attention, but experience difficulty in stabilizing changes in consumer behaviors. Other types, with less media coverage, such as those of anti-consumption activist groups or of local contract schemes between consumers and producer organizations, gather small numbers of consumers, but are very effective in producing and stabilizing new norms. Both types of political consumerism contribute to the reframing of norms on consumption by including new concerns that aim at achieving sustainability goals.

In the first part of the paper, we will address this issue of the history of political consumerism to show that consumer mobilizations have been organized, both through individual and collective action, in the past to organize consumers' responsibilities toward social problems. The progressive institutionalization of the consumers' movements contributed towards weakening political consumerism, and turned the mobilization of consumers into a defence of consumers' rights and interests.

Today, in both developed and developing countries, we still witness several forms of political consumerism [1]. In the second part of the paper, we present, based on several examples of consumers' mobilizations towards sustainable objectives, some evidence about contemporary forms of political consumerism that aim to enlighten consumers of their responsibilities. Some of this political consumerism emphasizes individual choices and the responsibilities of consumers, while trying to introduce change by modifying the purchasing behaviors of consumers. But there is also, as in other countries, another form of political consumerism that aims at organizing the collective power of consumers. Furthermore, new kinds of appeals to consumer involvement in collective action have emerged within the sustainable development context [5]. Local contracts between producers and groups of consumers organize new forms of governance within local food systems, in which consumers may decide collectively with producers which kinds of modes of production, distribution, and consumption they want to support. In this collective perspective, change does not rely on the responsibilities of individuals, but on the reframing of collective dimensions of consumption. We want to show that the social control coming from the group provides specific incentives for consumers to collectively change their consumption behaviors.

This contribution intends to use the ethnographic interpretation of consumption behaviors [15,16] to explore the possibilities and limits of consumer involvement in sustainable consumption, by analyzing the contemporary conditions of political consumerism. Hence, this issue of political consumerism needs to be assessed through a critical-reflexive approach [17], since this political or resistant behavior

of consumers is both shaped by the market (and marketers) and shapes the market; this behavior may be progressively integrated into consumption culture by researchers and marketers [18,19]. Political consumerism, like other consumption patterns stated by Consumer Culture Theory [20], has to be understood as a way for consumers to experience realities. However, political consumerism is more precisely a way of defining consumers' roles and their contributions to the society as a collective project.

In the second part, I will present some elements from the literature of history, which explain the different forms of consumer involvement in the political consumerism of the past. I will then show the main limits encountered by current consumer mobilization. In the third part, I describe the specific characteristics of political consumerism, relative to sustainable development in France, as based on the empirical material from various ethical food movements. In particular, I highlight some attempts to empower consumers in social networks, with respect to how these attempts aimed to trigger change in the consumers' economic and political behavior. The main finding of this study of the political organization of consumers involved in promoting sustainable development is that the market may not be the only arena for changing consumer behavior. On the other hand, social constraint and political empowerment seem to be rather more efficient.

## **2. From a Consumer's Political Power to Disciplined Consumerism**

In this part, I describe the historical and institutional conditions for the construction of a consumer identity. Throughout the history of consumer movements in Western countries, we observe, ranging from economic citizenship to an institutionalization of consumer capitalism, the progressive institutionalization of several consumer figures in the political economy. The fragmentation of consumer needs and interests by states, firms, and consumer movements may explain why consumer organizations today are no longer social movements aimed at involving consumers in political action.

### *2.1. Building Citizens' Rights through Market Action*

The market is not only an arena designed to organize peaceful exchanges of products between buyers and sellers; it has also progressively become a place where social groups try—with varying degrees of violence—to express their rights as citizens. To understand political consumerism as collective consumer action, we need to analyze the ways in which solidarity has been built between consumers. Many recent historical studies have provided rich evidence of this. In particular, they show that this solidarity among consumers may have different goals. Two of these goals can be identified as: asking consumers to show collective solidarity with another social group, and building solidarity within a group of consumers in order to defend their rights.

One of the first national boycotts in the United States was organized by the Knights of Labor national trade union at the end of the 19th century, in a specific context where strikes were not considered as effective enough [14]. Boycotts progressively became a means of increasing pressure on the production side, through strong mobilization of consumers on the market side. The American Federation of Labor systematized this idea by publishing a black list of firms that were accused of social dumping. The pressure on firms became so intense that they decided to organize the American Anti-Boycott Association in order to deal with these boycott calls and try to rebuild consumer

confidence in the market. In certain circumstances, the attempts to get consumers to show solidarity with workers were, of course, ineffective, especially when workers and unions were demanding very local and specific wage increases. However, trade unions, by empowering consumers, won some legitimacy in building collective action on the market side. One of the main evidences of this power was the table grapefruit boycott organized by César Chávez during the mid-20th century in the United States. The boycott was launched by the National Farm Workers Association in 1965 to support a strike of Californian farm workers who were demanding access to the labor rights of which they were deprived. The boycott obtained the support of other trade unions, as well as of students in religious groups. Its economic impact was huge, and prices collapsed, forcing farm owners to enter negotiations with the newly-created United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. The final agreement signed in 1970 involved 26 other farm enterprises as well. This boycott showed the capacity of consumers to be involved in strong mobilization for a cause that is not directly their concern. These different examples of consumer-oriented protest, designed by social movement organizations that were not directly concerned with consumption issues, show the contribution of a wide number of social movements toward the framing and re-framing of what the responsibility of consumers should be, with respect to a large number of social issues, including working conditions and rights.

However, on the basis of these examples, we should not see consumers simply as a group that can be mobilized by other social movements whose struggle they support. Consumers also struggle for themselves to defend their rights as citizens and as consumers.

The first examples of consumer mobilization reported by historians were the boycotts and consumer protests during the 18th and the 19th centuries in Great Britain and the United States [21]. Mass boycotts, such as that of British products during the 1760s by American pioneers, contributed to shaping the emerging US nation, as citizens became aware of forming a social group, first of all, as boycotters of British products.

Some of these movements, and especially the free trade movement against slavery, laid the foundations of modern political consumerism by focusing on the political dimension of trade. Consumers became aware of their ability to be members of a social group that could build a new politics of solidarity through the market. As Glickman said, “their understanding of the social consequences of consumption and of the consequent power of long-distance solidarity, while not ends in themselves for these groups, became the means by which modern citizens believed that they could promote social change” [21]. This analysis provides evidence for understanding why different social groups agreed to defend their rights by using market-related protests. For example, during the early 20th century the civil rights movement organized several protests known as the “don’t buy where you can’t work” and the “spend your money where you can work” campaigns, designed both to build labor rights for African American people and to establish their rights as US citizens. The market became an arena where people could fight for their rights and produce a strong connection between consumption and citizenship.

## 2.2. *The Connection between Consumption and Citizenship*

This strong connection between consumption and citizenship has been studied in depth by many historians. In particular, they have shown that it has been jointly produced by states and firms. Frank Trentmann described the shift in consumer politics that may be observed by comparing the social protests in Britain over cheap bread during the early 20th century, and over clean milk after the Second World War [22]. Organized consumers profoundly changed their views about their own action, but also about the policies that should be implemented concerning the production and consumption of these necessities. Whereas in the 1910s, various consumer organizations, such as cooperatives, had a strong radical-liberal perception of consumption, expected the state to provide economic actors with the conditions of free trade, and made the “cheap white loaf” the main icon of this consumer politics. The “pure milk” campaign of the 1940s, on the contrary, demanded strong state involvement in market regulation. Trentmann demonstrates that this shift should be interpreted as a deep transformation of the link between citizenship and consumption. During the free trade campaign, consumers viewed state regulation, and especially protectionism, as an invasion by the state of the domestic (especially the female) sphere. They grounded consumer citizenship in the community self-help system provided by cooperatives, reinforcing civil society as a strong social group, and founding citizenship on autonomy from both firms and the state. These consumer politics evolved towards a more social-democratic approach, as several difficulties arose: privation during the First World War called for a more interventionist food policy, and several official reports on food adulteration and disease required state regulation of the conditions of trade: “For organized consumers, the milk question went to the heart of the need to reform Britain’s political economy” [22]. In this new perspective, the state was an essential element of the connection between consumption and citizenship: by protecting consumer’s interests, in the name of civil society, it built a new democracy of consumers based on economic citizenship.

Lizabeth Cohen provides a comparable analysis of the US case [13]. As part of the New Deal, the state undertook the responsibility of protecting consumers’ interests from workers’ and firms’ interests, which were already well established, by representing consumers within the administration, and by passing the first significant law regulating consumption. Consumer organizations, such as the famous National Consumers League, believed that it was the state’s duty to protect consumers. On the other hand, during and after the Second World War, the state considered as consumers having certain duties, such as accepting restrictions during the war and consuming after the war. These duties became the best way for consumers to express their citizenship, thus completing the construction of a new connection between consumption and citizenship. As described by Lizabeth Cohen, US citizenship was based on the new idea of a Consumer Republic, in which mass consumption was to become the way to increase the country’s wealth. Through the market and consumption, a new social contract was built that was based on a specific identity of the consumer. A wide diversity of actors intended to define and protect this identity. These actors, such as consumer unions, the newly created National Associations of Consumers, consumer bureaus within the administration, and of course, marketing departments within firms and universities, organized consumers. The protection of consumers’ general interests lay in the hands of each consumer, whose choices had become atomized, autonomous, and a source of both economic growth and citizenship.

The development of the Marshall Plan in Europe contributed to the importation of a new vision for the role of consumption in economic development. Even though the idea of mass consumption would not be used as an element of a democratic ideal before the 1960s in most Western Europe countries, the consumer's role in the reconstruction effort was emphasized by the state both in France and in Great Britain [23].

These different historical studies provide evidence of the social construction of the role of consumers in the political economy. They show, through notions of the economic citizenship of consumers and of a consumer republic, how the state, in agreement with consumer organizations, helps to portray consumers as individuals with specific rights and duties in a democracy. Consumers' social identity stems, above all, from their capacity to choose, purchase, and consume products that have been designed by firms for them. This purchasing creates wealth, while the state and consumer organizations care of the rights of consumers.

### *2.3. The Atomization of Consumers and the Institutionalization of Consumer Organizations*

In these conditions, the role of consumer organizations has evolved profoundly. They may differ from one country to another, but they have all contributed to the atomization of consumers as a group, and to the fragmentation of their need to be protected.

Following the results proposed by Patricia Maclachlan, who compared consumer politics in Great Britain and the United States, and presented an in-depth study of the Japanese case [24], and by Gunar Trumbull, who compared the French and the German cases, three main models of consumer politics can be identified [25].

The United States is characterized by the Consumer Advocates model. The legitimacy of the state to intervene in consumer affairs was settled after Kennedy delivered his famous speech on the four rights of consumers: to be secure, to be informed, to choose, and to express. Observing that the consumer is the only citizen in the economy "without a high-powered lobbyist" [13], the President decided to be that lobbyist, and created the Consumer Advisory Council. In 1973, an independent regulatory agency was asked to establish new protection rights for consumers, and the authority of the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the Federal Trade Commission, and the Food and Drug Administration was extended. These new consumer politics afforded new opportunities for consumer organizations to lobby the government. Within this favourable context, Ralph Nader created his network of audacious consumer advocates, the Raiders. American consumer organizations wielded considerable power through the use of a wide range of tactics (from classical consumer protests, such as boycotts, to expert class action). However, at the same time, the freedom of these organizations was limited because the political administration harnessed the power of these consumer representatives. The segmentation of the consumers' needs by big companies' marketing techniques also limited the leeway of these organizations. The French case is similar to that of the US from the point of view of the state's involvement in consumer protection. This is especially because the French government took its ideas from the American ideology of consumer politics. However, as consumer organizations became stronger during the 1970s, owing mainly to substantial financial support from the state, they also became specific allies of the state with respect to the latter's standardization and information policy. This situation explains why some trade unions and family organizations have developed



activities in consumer advocacy in France. This gradual harnessing of the main consumer organizations led to a particular model of consumer protection, which operates through standards and laws. The harnessing also led to a specific and important consumption policy that protected consumers' interests from those of firms, and strongly differentiated the French model from the American one.

In Germany and Great Britain, consumer organizations are less politicized and more inclined to cooperate with both companies and the state. The information model, which characterizes these two countries, stems from strong cooperation between the upstream government and consumer organizations and firms; resulting in regulations that produce fewer constraints for economic actors.

Trumbull uses the term "consumer capitalism" to describe the form of political economy in which consumers' institutionalized interests contribute to defining the terms of public policies and companies' strategies. As observed, this institutionalization depends on the nature of the cooperation between consumer organizations and public authorities, which in turn is connected to the organization of the consumer movement and its relationship with companies. This is why consumers' political models may be so different from one country to the next. But this reality shows that today's consumer's political identity is built at the intersection of business strategies, public policies, and the actions of consumer movements. Part of the representation of consumers' interests has been captured by both the state and by large companies, with the proportion of earlier types of harnessing varying from one country to another. For example, according to Patricia Maclachlan, the Japanese case is an extreme example of the capture process by the state, since some consumer organizations may act as a public policy instrument, while the British case is an example of capture by large companies [24].

For states, companies, and consumer movements, the consumer is portrayed as an individual whose choice must be oriented and equipped with several devices: the market provides consumers with specific needs, while the state and consumer organizations provide them with rights and duties [26]. The three of them contribute to reducing consumer expression within an atomized demand for goods or protection. The consumer movement has evolved into a technical consumer advocacy aimed at defending specific and segmented interests, with regard to specific situations, and for this purpose, uses either the courts [27] or technocratic standardization.

This fine fragmentation of consumer interests with respect to purchasing choices makes the construction of consumers' collective action difficult today. In the second part of this paper, I explore the conditions of a possible involvement of consumers in what could be identified as political action. I will show that most of the attempts to involve consumers in political consumerism target individual responsibility. These attempts provide consumers with labels or market devices to change their individual purchasing behavior. But I would like to stress that there are also some collective experiments, which instead target the collective dimension of consumption.

### **3. Involving Consumers in Ethical Consumption in France**

As in many other countries, consumer organizations in France are strongly institutionalized and are at the core of an impressive consumption policy that makes the French consumer one of the most protected in the world. Yet at the same time, these organizations have to face a major criticism: they are not large grassroots movements, and in a way, one finds it difficult to support the claim that they

are representative of consumers. A good example of this difficulty (with respect to the French consumer organizations to claim to act on behalf of consumers) is that these organizations were not identified as the first spokespersons in the development of conditions of sustainable consumption. As in other countries, the idea of the role of the consumer in sustainable development emerged in France at the end of the 1990s, already some time after the Johannesburg Earth Summit, where consumers of Northern countries were blamed by Southern countries for their direct responsibility in the deterioration of the environment. Several NGOs and social movements tried to involve consumers more deeply in what could be a political project on sustainable consumption. They were quickly joined by companies and public authorities. Most of them found it difficult to generate profound changes in consumer behaviors and to establish the conditions of what could be called a political awareness of the consumers' responsibility. Some of them succeeded, as we will see in the last part of this section, but do not use market tactics as much as others groups do. We can thus conclude that the market may not be an arena for consumers' political involvement.

The purpose here is not to assess the different instruments that are used by public authorities to influence consumer behaviors, but to present the role of NGOs and social movement activities in the reshaping of consumption practices.

### *3.1. Patterns of Political Consumerism in France*

French consumers, who wish to change their consumption patterns, in order to be more environmentally friendly, or to show their concern for social justice, have access to a wide range of goods, services, and recommendations. These include advice proposed by public authorities, such as the National Agency for the Environment (ADEME), regarding the use of water, household appliances, energy for the home, transportation in urban areas, or product label identification. This advice is available for consumers in brochures, or on websites, designed by the government, or may be disseminated through the media (e.g., commercials or radio).

Other propositions come from NGOs or companies, which offer labelled products, such as "green" products, organic food, and fair trade products. In France, several green labels exist for products; some have been introduced by the public authorities, while others are private initiatives. "*NF-environnement*" is the French official label for environmentally friendly products. Nineteen types of products may be sold using this label, which is the property of the French Agency for Standardization (AFNOR). This agency is also in charge of the certification for the label. The European eco-label created in 1992 is also used, but less often than in Belgium or Germany. A label for organic foods, the AB Label (*Agriculture Biologique*), was created in 1985 by the French Ministry of Agriculture, to identify products that comply with the French requirements on organic food production. In France, only 1.8% of the surface area farmed produced organic food in 1995, with a 5% increase since 2004 (Fédération Nationale d'Agriculture Biologique). Finally, other labels from abroad may also be used to sell products. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) label is controlled by three types of actors (NGOs working on environmental issues, NGOs working on social justice issues, and companies exploiting or distributing wood) and may be used to sell sustainable wood products in home improvement stores. The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) label is proposed by the NGO, WWF, and Unilever to certify products that comply with requirements concerning sustainability. In France,

about 12 frozen fish products use this private label. The private Max Havelaar trademark is given by the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations (FLO) to products that comply with fair trade requirements. These are the main labels used in France, most of which are available both in supermarkets and in specialized shops (organic food shops and world shops).

Figures produced by the French Agency for the Environment (ADEME) show that total sales in France of eco-labelled products grew from 50 million euros in 1998 to 800 million euros in 2005. But the market share of eco-labelled products may vary widely from one market segment to another. For example, eco-labelled products account for 25% of the market share for garbage bags, but no more than a 1 to 3% market share in most other segments. No figure is available for the market share of organic food products, but sales have been evaluated by the French Agency for organic food at 1.6 billion euros in 2005, with a growth rate of almost 10% per annum. Finally, the fair trade figures supplied by the Max Havelaar Company also show a considerable increase, but remain low: 120 million euros in 2005.

These mixed results show that a substantial increase, in the consumption of what remains a very small share of the market, has to be related to French consumers' sensitivity to political consumerism. A recent survey by the French Center for Research on Living Conditions (CREDOC) [28] on political consumerism shows a gap between what French consumers say about their political involvement through consumption and what they actually do when they shop. In 2006, 44% of French consumers said they cared about companies' ethical involvement while choosing their products, which is 6 points more than in the 2002 survey, and 61% said they would agree to pay 5% more for a product produced by such a company, which is 9 points more than five years earlier. They also said they would be able to boycott products from companies with unethical practices. When asked about their purchases over the past six months, 21% said they had purchased a product for ethical reasons and 30% said they may have done so, but were not absolutely sure. This political choice was more important for high-income consumers (72%) than for low-income consumers (45%). Such a survey has some limits. Most importantly, it is based on statements rather than acts, and therefore cannot describe real consumption patterns regarding political consumerism in France. But it does, nevertheless, show that ethical framing of consumption may be used as common knowledge between consumers, and perhaps as a social norm: consumers claim, (and the more they earn, the more they do so), that they may shop for the environment or for social justice. The high score of answers shows that they have integrated the fact that it is socially and politically correct to show such political involvement in their purchase choices.

These data portray the French situation as a case in which consumers are aware of the power of their purse, but use it sparingly, especially when they are economically constrained. In the next section, I provide a theoretical explanation of the limits of such political involvement of consumers in the marketplace.

### *3.2. The Limits of Market Action to Build Consumers' Political Awareness of Sustainable Development*

It seems important to place the development of a supply of ethical products (fair trade products, organic food, eco-labelled products) within the context of mass consumption.

As described by Lizabeth Cohen [13], the development of a mass consumption economy was a fertile context for the articulation between general interest in growth in the post-war period, and individual interest in spending for consumption. The state, companies, and consumer movements all wanted the best conditions for consumers to spend their money [29], and they all worked at designing and implementing what was to become known as market segmentation. This was a term introduced by Wendell Smith and Pierre Martineau in the late 1950s. With trademarks and distribution chains [30], market segmentation was one of the pillars in the making of mass markets. One of the main assumptions of the principles of market segmentation is that these groups of consumers, or consumption patterns, already exist in society; these groups are kinds of sub-cultures that regularly emerge to bring together individuals and differentiate them from other groups. Even the development of what historians called the consumer society has been described as the social construction of a sub-culture in the 19th century, based on Romanticism, which made consumption a major occupation [31]. The market appears then as a suitable arena for individuals to express their identities through their consumption choices. Even market specialists acknowledge that markets produce the fragmentation of consumers into isolated groups [32]. From this perspective, each critique of mass consumption society can be reinterpreted as the development of a new sub-culture, which the market ends up supplying. Examples include the hippie or the beat generation cultures. Capitalism is founded on an immense capacity to integrate its own critique [33]. This mechanism has been assessed in depth in consumer studies, especially by authors who have proposed a theory of post-modern consumers based on their huge capacity for reflexivity in their consumption behavior [34–37].

In France, the first alternative supply proposed to consumers to make them responsible for environmental protection, or for the development of social justice, was proposed by groups formed to challenge some of the conventional market rules. In the 1970s, some fair trade products were sold in specialized shops by *Artisans du Monde*, an NGO, which adopted the new ideology of development based on “trade not aid”. The *Biocoop* network, a consumer cooperative, was also developed in the 1970s to organize the retail distribution of newly available organic food production. Most of these groups of producers, importers, sellers, and consumers had the feeling of belonging to a politically involved social group characterized by concerns on environmental or social justice issues.

For many food marketing departments or retailing companies, these positions sounded like a new sub-culture, perfectly congruent with the post-modern consumer concept, and could easily be incorporated into new market offerings. Most supermarkets had a variety of organic products on their shelves by the end of the 1980s, and were selling different fair trade products under the Max Havelaar trademark by the end of the 1990s. The point in this paper is not to establish whether fair trade and organic food are a sub-culture or not, but to show that large companies in food processing and retailing have dealt with them as though they were fruitful critiques that should be incorporated as new market segments. In France today, fair trade products and organic food are still available in specialized stores (*Biocoop* or *Artisans du Monde* shops for example), but are also largely available in supermarkets.

In a former contribution, we showed that consumers learn to choose their products in supermarkets by relying on what we called a “delegation process” [38]. This idea emphasizes the role of certain technical devices to inform and guide consumers, such as trademarks, logos, labels, or certification. As consumers are not able to check the supply chain, they simply rely on some “delegates,” which they decide to trust. From this perspective, eco-labels, fair trade, and organic food labels are just some extra

“delegates” in the supermarket, which consumers may or may not decide to follow or to trust. In the marketplace, the idea of sustainable, ethical, or political consumption essentially appears as a new market proposition intended for the specific market segments of consumers who are willing to show their responsibility by shopping in a certain way.

However, this does not mean that this consumption is excluded from what is called political consumerism. In other words, the political dimension of consumption does not disappear simply because most ethical consumption is produced by large companies. We agree with the analysis proposed by Michele Micheletti, who has defined such consumption as an individualized collective action [2]. Even when they are expressed in the marketplace and driven by business strategy, consumer choices are politicized. Micheletti shows that in a context where involvement becomes more flexible and network oriented, individuals try to combine their daily life with political causes. Consumption provides a good opportunity for such a combination, since it is driven both by self-interest, like every other purchase choice, and by the general welfare, for the ethical message it contains. The collective dimension of what remains an individual choice depends not only on this post-modern reflexivity theorized by Beck, but also on the aggregating effect of every individual purchase. These two causal factors are summed up in the concept of the ecological and ethical footprint of daily private lives. Additionally, the collective dimension depends on the amount of knowledge that must be translated with respect to the environmental consequences of consumption [6,39]. Many social movements and NGOs promoting ethical consumption, such as Max Havelaar for fair trade, and Biocoop for organic food, make the following type of assumption: consumers’ political power will derive from the aggregate effects of their individual purchases, which will help more small producers in the South or support more small organic farmers in the North. Max Havelaar advertisements tend to show this aggregate effect and to use this argument to defend the firm’s strategy in contracting with large retailing companies.

Hence, consumption in the marketplace may definitely be a political act for both those who promote it by selling products (such as NGOs, cooperatives, or alternative producers and retailers, or even companies) and those who purchase these products. Why do market shares of ethical products fail to show the level of awareness and involvement in political consumerism described by the survey data? Several theoretical reasons may be proposed. The first is that, as shown by the surveys, this awareness concerns mostly high-income consumers, and economic constraints play a major role in the segmentation between convinced consumers and those reluctant to shop for ethics. Many people may therefore answer positively because they have accepted the necessity of political consumerism as a social norm, but actually think they cannot afford it. However, there is a second reason. The activity of grocery shopping is strongly informed by a wide variety of prescriptions and devices, such as plans, dispositions, and constraints from the consumer’s side; trademarks, labels, and packaging from the product side; and prescriptions, commercials, disposals, and sales from the market environment inside and outside the supermarket [40]. This wide variety of devices, combined with that of the supply, contributes to making purchase choices highly erratic and unstable. Prescriptions from the government, fair trade, or organic food labels participate in this diversity of devices, thus contributing to framing and unframing consumers’ choices. Purchase choices are always a trade-off, not only between products, but also between devices that are able to inform the choice. Like other purchasing choices, consumption of ethical products in a mass consumption market cannot be anything but unstable.

Earlier I presented two avenues for political consumerism that are proposed to consumers in France: first, through the government's prescriptions and guidelines for changing consumption patterns regarding transportation and the use of energy or water, in home improvement or ordinary consumption; second, through the ethical products supplied by NGOs, cooperatives, alternative producers, and retailers. In the next part, I present a third avenue for consumers' political involvement.

### 3.3. Consumers' Involvement in Social Movements

Today, several groups seek to involve consumers in collective actions aimed at improving their awareness on ethical or environmental issues [38]. I will present two of them. The first is a social movement organization focused on political consumerism, derived from the anti-globalization movement ATTAC (*Association pour la taxation des transactions financières et pour l'action citoyenne*—Association for the promotion of financial transaction taxation and of citizen activism) and created at the end of the 1990s. This organization, consisting of about a hundred members, only a few of whom are real activists, provides a large range of information to its members on the social, economic, and environmental effects of consumption. The movement is based on a very precise ideology of consumers' responsibility, which fills the gap between two points of view: one in which this responsibility is overemphasized or exaggerated by governments that consider most of the damage to the environment or social justice as a result of consumers' foolish and selfish behavior; and, the second, a view in which this responsibility is minimized, for example, by some fair trade operators who consider that once consumers have bought some fair trade products, they have done their duty. The movement thus positions its prescriptions between what it calls an over- and an under-responsibility of consumers. It attempts to show accurate evidence of the effects of consumers' choices by describing the functioning of mass markets and capitalism, as it is usually portrayed in the anti-globalization arguments. Most of the members and activists of the group are also involved in ecological, anti-advertising, or downsizing movements. The group belongs to international networks that campaign against the effects of capitalism on the environment and social justice (such as Adbusters, Public Citizens, anti-GMO movements) [41]. Its members promote fair trade products and organic foods that are not sold in supermarkets, but in alternative retailing networks. The groups' main opponents are not only large retailing or food processing companies, but also the government, especially when the group considers the public regulations insufficient with respect to the environmental or social justice effects of consumption and production. But as shown by [37], who studied similar groups in the United States, ordinary consumers are also targets of this social movement, especially when the movement denounces consumers' foolish consumption behavior.

This situation tends to establish members' and activists' involvement on the basis of the feeling of adherence to a social group of expert consumers who share knowledge on the capitalist and mass consumption system, and provide one another with accurate advice for their purchase choices. In a sense, these people feel different from other consumers, not only on both moral and ethical grounds, but also with respect to knowledge and awareness. These exchanges of expertise and experience between the different members of the group build an important social constraint, which provides members strong incentive to change their individual behaviors. Most of the organizations' leaders were activists and felt very concerned about sustainable issues. They had already changed their

consumption behavior. For them, there is no use of big retailing or chain stores and no use of cars. Additionally, they only consume local organic food and seasonal fruits and vegetables, and only utilize fair trade products. They share services or domestic appliances, reduce their consumption and waste, and find some solutions to reduce their energy consumption. But most of the other members were just aware about some environmental issues and their emergency. Once one entered the organization, they learnt a lot from other members experiences, adopted some solutions (such as the collective buying schemes developed by the group to source local organic products), and some of them were also eager to provide the group with new solutions (such as finding some technical solution to insulate windows to decrease energy consumption), to share they own experiments (with washable diapers, organic home-made washing powder), and to involve themselves in collective campaigns (against GM food, against ionized food) or actions (against advertising). Indeed, the group provides different resources to each individual consumer: practical solutions for consumption, information and expertise on environmental issues, and collective support to share services and assistance. But, the group also provides consumers with new norms on consumption that may be shared, and which can also help to legitimate each individual choice. Indeed, some of the members explain that their new choices about consumption may put them aside from their former groups of friends or relatives, who may think they are becoming too requiring or too critical. For these members, the activist organization provides them with a more similar social context with consumers that share not only their ideas, but also their consumption practices.

But, in the meantime, the group may also be very demanding of each individual, asking him or her to comply with specific norms of consumption. Even though no member has been fired by the group for his or her consumption practices, a member may tease some member that does not adopt the norms, or more often, some members adopt a very drastic compliance with these new norms such that other members may feel social pressure.

This position may sometimes trigger a kind of radicalization within the group, on certain subjects. In such cases, the members in favour of a radical shift in consumer behavior (stop shopping in supermarkets, stop buying unnecessary goods, support alternative farming and production, ride instead of driving) clash with those who prefer a gradual approach. This radicalization may also explain the high turnover in membership, as some members find that the group may be too elitist or demanding on consumers. Another reason for the high turnover stems from the fact that changing practices of consumption may offer few rewards for involvement. As explained earlier, consumer organizations usually wish to collectively defend consumers' individual interests and rights. They are more of an advocacy technocracy than real social movements where activists can derive rewards from their involvement owing to its general interest. The third explanation for the turnover is related to the difficulty of mobilizing through involvement. This involvement often cannot lead to a collective and visible action. Even if all the activists in the movement change their daily consumption habits, this involvement remains thankless and invisible. For example, when many members called for more collective action, the group responded by joining national and international protest campaigns, such as the "Buying nothing day", "the campaign against the abuse of environmental arguments in advertising", the "campaign against the ionization of food" launched by Food and Water Watch, or the campaign against GMOs. But most of all, the group promotes consumers' involvement in networks of local production and consumption of food, especially those built on the model of the US "Community

Supported Agriculture” (CSA), the second social movement on political consumerism that we will examine here.

The AMAP system (*Association pour le Maintien d’une Agriculture Paysanne*) was developed in Southeastern France at the end of the 1990s, in collaboration with the anti-globalization movement, ATTAC, and the small farmers’ union, *Confédération Paysanne*. The system, inspired by the American CSA and the Japanese *Tekei*, is based on a contract between a small farmer and several consumers, who agree to pay six months in advance for a weekly basket of fruit and vegetables [42]. Today, there are about 200 of these groups of consumers in France. They may also contract with several farmers for the supply, or a wider variety of products, such as bread, milk, eggs, meat, or cheese. Consumers, as members of these groups, are involved in a direct relationship with the farmer: they decide collectively on the biological variety that will be grown, they help the farmer, and they visit the farm two or three times a year. The main aim of the AMAP system is to support small-scale farming activities around cities (green belts). Most of the farmers produce organic food products, but they also may choose, in agreement with their consumers, not to comply with the requirements of certification. As described earlier, this movement allows for the diffusion, within consumer groups, of a learning process that progressively makes most of them relatively knowledgeable on ethical consumption. It also emphasizes the awareness, responsibility, and possibly, the morality of AMAP consumers, compared to that of ordinary consumers. Through information and advice, consumers learn from one another where and how to find products that comply with the ethics of sustainable development, how to improve their home or their use of energy and water, how to collectively organize for transportation or for care services, and so on. As in the social movement described above, the AMAP groups have a high turnover: about 30% of the consumers may exit the system each year, but because of long waiting lists, new consumers enter the group immediately. The two also have in common the fact that they connect this strong involvement of consumers in ethical everyday consumption with their empowerment in local politics. The first group promotes, for example, the diverse involvement of citizen consumers in local decisions, such as the provision of school meals by local farmers instead of large catering companies, the negotiation with public authorities for the allocation of land to small-scale farming instead of real estate development, or the establishment of a farmers’ market in the city. The AMAP system provides a useful framework for this empowerment of consumers through learning processes, as well as through the connection between some of the members and other social movement networks (e.g., anti-GMO movement, ecological movement, anti-globalization movement) or other social groups (e.g., parents groups, citizen groups, sports associations).

This political consumerism is then strongly connected, not only with market protest, through boycotts and buycotts, but also with social constraints within consumers’ groups and with the political empowerment of citizen consumers in what could be called a food citizenship. As noted above, this political consumerism seems to be highly erratic, but one of its particularities is its connection to more conventional forms of collective and political action: from campaigning and protesting, to lobbying, including voting. Another particularity of this political consumerism is its congruence with the collective dimension of consumption that has been stressed by the theoretical framework on consumption practices [40,43]. This perspective highlights what in consumption choices relates to collective and historical contexts. Indeed, individual practices are deeply rooted in socio-technical



systems that are path dependent, and which strongly constrain individuals' choices, as Shove showed for the case of the use of air-conditioning, but also for laundering practices [11]. But these practices are also governed by collective norms that may legitimate individual choices and stabilize these choices [9]. The collective experiment of political consumerism provides interesting initiatives to assess the way change in consumption behavior may come. Changes comes neither from information nor from market incentives, as is usually the case with political consumerism through boycotts and boycott, or through consumer education. Instead, changes come from the production of social norms and constraints within groups.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this contribution, I have stressed, based on the French case, the specific conditions of contemporary political consumerism. As in many other countries where consumer movements have been captured in the institutionalization of their representations, these movements strongly contribute to extending the functioning of a mass consumption system by organizing an expert and efficient advocacy of consumers' rights. The expression of consumers' political involvement remains possible, in response to various institutional prescriptions and advice or market propositions by NGOs, cooperatives or retailing companies. Through their individual purchases, consumers may show their concern for general-interest issues, such as environmental protection or social justice. These individual choices will aggregate and then have a collective effect by reflecting consumers' awareness of the importance of these issues. However, some studies show that despite the high level of awareness of French consumers, their consumption habits remain misleading [44,45]. I explain this paradoxical situation by demonstrating that markets do not provide a sufficiently stable environment to generate deep and lasting shifts in consumers' behaviors. I propose to focus instead on another type of consumer involvement, that of social movements, which emphasizes consumers' direct responsibility through their buying choices. These movements, such as a group concerned with political consumerism and the system of local production and consumption of food, provide consumers with alternatives for their purchases, through a contract or a list of alternative shops and suppliers, as well as through collective actions, such as protests in national and international campaigns, or involvement in local politics. Even with a high turnover of their membership, these movements produce a stable shift in the consumption behavior of their members, based on strong learning processes about consumption patterns and a broad view of consumers' political responsibility.

This case shows how contemporary forms of political consumerism borrow from former ones. The idea of responsibility in the earlier consumer movements was based on the idea of solidarity between several actors, such as between workers and consumers, or between consumers themselves. In the movements that we explored, solidarity between consumers and farmers, producers, or workers from the South, or between consumers themselves, is the core ideology. In the earliest consumer movements, consumers were fighting for their rights, not only as consumers, but also as potential workers or citizens. In contemporary consumer movements, consumers fight for the rights of several other constituencies, such as future generations, biodiversity, or citizens from the South who do not have the possibility to express themselves. Even the link between citizenship and consumption is strongly reactivated, since most of the prescriptions from both the government and social movements use a

rhetoric based on the idea of a disciplined consumer, who must behave individually for the good of the community as a whole. Finally, early and contemporary political consumer movements have in common their combination of a wide variety of tactics, from market tactics such as boycotts and buycotts, to protest and collective action, and also political empowerment. In the specific case of a sustainable consumption paradigm, the French case shows the limits of market tactics in triggering shifts of consumption patterns, and the relative efficiency of consumers' empowerment in political action. The question of whether the market should remain the only and best way to change consumption patterns is worth considering.

The theoretical framework that sees consumption as social practices is provided by several scholars in sociology [7-11]. The framework emphasizes the role of social norms in the shaping of consumption practices. This analytical perspective is of particular interest in assessing the effect of different political consumerism tactics. We showed in this contribution that political consumerism is not a new phenomenon and has always shaped and reshaped consumption norms by imposing consideration of new concerns related to consumption (e.g., civic rights, working conditions, fairness of trade, the environment, biodiversity...). Activists have deeply contributed to this reshaping of consumption norms, as have firms and states. Regarding sustainable development issues, activists from today, in France, and in other countries, are using two forms of political consumerism. The most common relies on individual responsibility, providing consumers with market incentives to change their purchasing choices. Its effects seem to be limited and consumers may not change very radically their consumption behavior through market incentives. Another solution is implemented by social movement organizations that organize groups of consumers and push them to find not only find collective solutions and involvement in protesting, but also in consumption practices. These groups may provide an interesting case to follow in terms of the emergence, sharing, and stabilization of new norms, with respect to consumption practices, and also provide insight into the conditions of implementing sustainable consumption practices.

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