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Lifestyle transitions in unequal societies

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The “Yellow Vests” crisis has brought to the forefront the issue of social justice and the fair sharing of the burden associated with achieving the ecological transition. The principle of the carbon tax price signal, which is intended to change behaviours, has been strongly rejected by a segment of the population. Beyond the necessary analysis of [the limitations of this tool](#), this opposition raises more general questions: how can we achieve a transition of lifestyles and consumption in an unequal society? While discussions on eco-friendly gestures and responsible consumption tend to envisage a homogeneous society with average individuals, what does the reality of a heterogeneous society imply?

To provide some answers to this question, we consider two possible drivers of change, among others: the effect of price signals; and changes in terms of social norms through the gradual diffusion of ecological values.

What are the impacts of carbon taxation?

The first driver of change that could play a role in implementing the ecological transition would be based on a price adjustment for all goods and services in proportion to their ecological impacts: such as the carbon tax on energy and the “malus” tax on vehicles. For changes to lifestyles and purchasing behaviours to have a sufficient ecological impact, the tax would have to be applied to a gradually increasing number of goods and services. Lower taxation of sustainable goods and services, however, would not guarantee lower costs than their less sustainable counterparts, at least initially. On the one hand, certain “niche” goods would be unable to benefit from price-lowering economies of scale. While on the other hand, it is likely that environmental standards would increase production costs. This is a problem in an unequal society, as we have seen with the carbon tax in France, because the poorest households end up paying a higher share of taxes¹ in proportion to their income, and are more limited in their consumption choices. While wealthier households can easily afford the additional cost of higher taxes to maintain their consumption behaviour: for example, one third of new vehicle buyers in France opt for an SUV (sport utility vehicle), despite the greater taxation on these vehicles (malus tax and carbon tax). To have a real impact on these consumers, it would be necessary to implement politically difficult tax levels. Ultimately, one way of trying to reconcile this taxation approach with inequality issues would be to implement a strong and sustainable inequality reduction policy, for example through income redistribution from the carbon tax towards the poorest households, as many recent works have suggested.²

Consumption and social norms

A second driver of change could be the progressive diffusion of ecological values. Information, marketing and support for changes to social norms regarding what is socially valued and devalued (e.g. Sweden's *flygskam* movement that encourages people not to fly) would gradually change consumption modes and lifestyles. We are starting to observe such action among certain social groups, particularly urban dwellers, in relation to meat consumption and individual car usage. However, the integration of these new consumption trends is uneven across social groups. For example, although smoking is in decline across France, blue-collar workers are twice as likely to smoke than executives, and the gap is widening.³ Regarding food,⁴ for the most affluent population groups we observe that dietary choices and slimness are very internalised principles, to these people the notion of “eating well” refers to a healthy and balanced diet. Whereas less wealthy classes tend to favour the norms of abundance and eating for pleasure, and consider “eating well” to be the ability to afford whatever consumer society has to offer. It should be remembered that for the poorest households, consumption fulfils a social integration function⁵ in a middle-class society where aspiration to a certain consumption level⁶ is the rule. For households that cannot today afford this level of consumption, communication on sustainable consumption, combined with the logic of doing without (e.g. doing without meat and certain comforts, for example by cycling instead of driving, or reducing household heating), is probably inadequate and inaudible.

Furthermore, although financially disadvantaged households with higher cultural capital (higher education) have a greater environmental sensitivity, the adoption of small ecological gestures does not compensate for other highly emitting practices, which creates a gap between value and climate footprint among this population group.⁷ While consumer behaviour by the wealthiest population groups has a much greater ecological impact than the rest of the population: air travel, larger homes, swimming pools, frequent replacement of electronic and household appliances, heavy and powerful cars, second homes, etc. This explains why the world's richest 10% account for about 45% of CO2 emissions.⁸ In a way, this type of lifestyle and consumption patterns can now be seen as the definition of wealth.

Beyond the “average individual”

These observations should encourage us to bring the issue of inequality to the forefront in discussions on the societal changes associated with the ecological transition, and in doing so to abandon the simplification of an “average individual”. A mobilising narrative of an ecological transition must consider the social role of consumption, and present a vision of solidarity and effort sharing among individuals from diverse income levels across our society. Several political signals are suggesting movement in the right direction: in recognising the fight against inequality as a universal challenge, in 2015 the UN retained the reduction of inequalities within and between countries as one of the 17 **Sustainable Development Goals**, alongside other social and environmental objectives. More recently, Europe, in its **new strategic agenda**, has designated inequality reduction as one of the necessary steps to achieve the goal of a carbon neutral Europe. The task now is to translate these objectives into practical public policies: France, with the implementation of its Citizen Convention on the Ecological Transition, could very soon have the necessary tools to do so.

Finally, this look at demand and consumption should be coupled with a consideration of the role of supply and producers, and in particular the impact of advertising: this will be the subject of a future blog post.

¹ See <https://www.ofce.sciences-po.fr/blog/10664-2/>

² The different analyses published since the start of the year all converge towards this idea: IDDRI (https://www.iddri.org/sites/default/files/PDF/Publications/Catalogue%20iddri/Propositions/201901-PB0119%20taxe%20carbone_0.pdf), Terra Nova-I4CE (http://tnova.fr/system/contents/files/000/001/715/original/Terra-Nova-I4CE-Note-Climat-fiscalit_280219.pdf?1551270609), Conseil d'analyse économique (<http://www.cae-eco.fr/IMG/pdf/cae-note050v2.pdf>), OFCE (<https://www.ofce.sciences-po.fr/pdf/dtravail/OFCEWP2019-06.pdf>), Réseau Action Climat (<https://reseauactionclimat.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/dossier-fiscalite-rac.pdf>).

³ https://www.inegalites.fr/Tabac-un-marqueur-social?id_theme=19 Period 2005-2014.

⁴ Régnier & Masullo (2009). Obésité, goûts et consommation. Intégration des normes d'alimentation et appartenance sociale. Revue française de sociologie, 50, 747-773. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rfs.504.0747>

⁵ Bergeron et al. (2018). Le Biais comportementaliste. Presses de Sciences Po.

⁶ <https://www.cairn.info/revue-vingtieme-siecle-revue-d-histoire-2006-3-page-137.htm>

⁷ Sessego, V., Hebel, P. (2019). Consommation durable : l'engagement de façade des classes supérieures, CREDOC, Consommation et mode de vie N°303

⁸ Chancel, L., Piketty, T. (2015). Carbon inequality from Kyoto to Paris, Ecole d'économie de Paris

MODES DE VIE

ENJEUX SOCIAUX

INÉGALITÉS

TAXATION

CARBON PRICE

CONSOMMATION