

How to debate the transition towards sustainable lifestyles?

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The measures implemented to fight against the Covid-19 pandemic (lockdown, travel restrictions, contact tracing apps) have rekindled the debate on respecting individual freedoms (Nay, 2020). This issue of interference from public powers into the private sphere is not new—it has been a fundamental concern in modern political societies since the 19th century (Constant, 1819)—but it is particularly relevant in novel ways in the digital surveillance technology era. It is also very much present in the ecological transition debate, whenever the issue of changing lifestyles is addressed. This issue of freedom recurs regularly in the discourse on environmental public policies, such as during debates on environmental standards that are considered overly restrictive, or on fuel taxation that would limit the freedom to travel and, in a more extreme way, whenever accusations of “green dictatorship” or radical environmentalism¹ are made.

This *Issue Brief* explores the subject of the links between individual freedoms and public environmental policies from the perspective of the legitimacy of public action. Starting from the hypothesis that public policies are essentially intended to guide practices and lifestyles to enable groups of individuals to form communities, it is possible to go beyond polemics on whether or not a public policy destroys liberty, to collectively identify the conditions that legitimize public action: how far can public authorities go without jeopardising individual freedoms? This *Issue Brief* shows that the answer to this question is related, in particular, to the interpretive framework used to understand lifestyles, and that there are several responses depending on the adopted perspective. Thus, the legitimization of public action requires, above all, a collective debate on the different visions of lifestyle determinants, so that changes can be democratically chosen, rather than imposed due to the urgency of future crises.

¹ Carbou, G. (2019). “Liberticide, l’écologie ? Le vrai débat est ailleurs”. Reporterre, 11 July 2019. <https://reporterre.net/Liberticide-l-ecologie-le-vrai-debat-est-ailleurs>

KEY MESSAGES

The reformulation of the conflict between individual freedoms and public action is useful for debating lifestyles in the context of ecological transition.

This *Issue Brief* proposes eight different interpretive frameworks to consider lifestyle changes and help structure the debate on the legitimacy of action. Each one carries within it a specific conception of the problem to be solved, a vision of the individual and of the public action to be implemented.

These frameworks make it possible to show the justifications in terms of freedom, and to show that lifestyle changes as part of the ecological transition do not automatically result in the loss of freedom: they can be neutral or even regarded as liberating.

Discussing the different forms of possible change on the basis of practical examples allows us to collectively judge uncertainties, benefits and risks, and thus to bring out new collective preferences in participatory debates or to enrich prospective scenarios.

1. SEVERAL WAYS OF REPRESENTING LIFESTYLE CHANGES

A lifestyle can be considered as a reference frame for social life (Maresca, 2017), largely conditioned by collective determinants: social norms, regulations, infrastructure, etc. (Brimont and Saujot, 2020). The public authorities, and in particular the State, are not the only actors to take action on this reference framework, driven by all actors of social life: businesses, media—social or otherwise—citizen movements, artists, financial actors, etc. It does, however, play the particular role of a principle conductor, as the protector of public interest and of community life. Thus, a public policy, by definition, provides a framework for practices or lifestyles to enable a group of individuals to live together as a community.

While public authorities can legitimately take action on lifestyles, the issue of their scope of intervention is a constant subject of debate in democratic societies, and should not be questioned in isolation, but rather contextualized: what will be considered as legitimate public action depends on the convictions and values of each citizen, but also on the principles in the name of which the State justifies its intervention in a given field and the methods of action (which public policies are implemented). This legitimacy also depends on the interpretive framework adopted to analyse our lifestyles: how does the State define the problem that needs to be resolved? Lifestyles are indeed the result of many determinants, some acting more at the individual level, others more at the collective level. The hierarchy between these factors is not clear cut, with some favouring certain explanatory factors over others. In the public debate, one can thus identify different "registers" for the discourse on lifestyle change, some focusing on technology and innovation, others on regulation or economic incentives, and others on changing social norms, etc.

Let us take the example of food, in this case sustainable food. When the founder of The Good Food Institute (a company that develops cellular meat) stated that: "the reduction of meat consumption will only be possible if we give people alternatives that are the same or better in terms of cost and taste"² and that the solution proposed involves producing meat from plants or stem cells, he was seeing the problem of sustainable food primarily as a technical issue. There are, however, other ways of viewing this problem. For Yuka (a company that rates food products based on barcode scanning), which aims to "help consumers make better choices for their health and represents a lever for action to lead manufacturers to offer better products",³ sustainable food is above all an issue of information and of power asymmetry between consumers and the food industry. This interpretation is incomplete according to an NGO such as the RAC (*Réseau Action Climat* - Climate Action Network) and the Solagro association, which assert that even "with the best

² Smart agriculture can also be linked to this register in the field of sustainable food.

³ Yuka website, visited on 24/04/2020.

TABLE 1. Eight interpretive frameworks for considering lifestyle changes

Interpretive framework	Vision for change	Examples of expected public action
Innovation	We must innovate to preserve our lifestyles, technology will help solve ecological problems.	Funding of research programmes (e.g. European Horizon 2020 programme); advantageous taxation for corporate R&D (e.g. the French Competitiveness and Employment Tax Credit, CICE).
Price signal	Lifestyle changes are driven by market and price signals.	Ecological taxation (e.g. carbon tax); subsidies to households (e.g. energy retrofitting).
Cognitive biases	We must act, via behavioural sciences, to correct cognitive biases and change our behaviour.	Changing the way we present choices to citizens, the way we communicate. See for example Griessinger (2019), Attwood <i>et al.</i> (2019), Park & Barker (2020).
Consumption	It is through responsible consumption that we will achieve a broader change in lifestyles.	Product labelling (e.g., nutriscore); regulation (e.g., consumer credit agreements must state borrower's repayment obligations).
Spirituality & sufficiency	We must transform society, seek emancipation from the material environment and build an ethos of sufficiency.	Education (e.g. about the links between nature and humanity).
Socio-technical systems	We must transform socio-technical systems that structure our lifestyles by defining what is possible, practical and imaginable.	Building a cycling strategy (<i>système vélo*</i>); land-use planning (e.g. allocation of building permits); labour market (commuting distance deemed acceptable by French Employment Agency).
Social norms	Lifestyles can be changed by changing social norms on what is acceptable and desirable.	Information campaign (e.g. road safety); law** (e.g. Veil law on abortion).
Regulation	Lifestyle changes are achieved through regulatory action (bans, norms, monitoring, rationing, quotas).	Reinforcement of specifications for different products or prohibition of sales; rationing system.

* See the *système vélo* as defined by the *Fédération des usagers de la bicyclette*, which illustrates the links between social practices, services and infrastructure. https://www.fub.fr/sites/fub/files/fub/Communiqués/decryptage_fub_planvelo_14-09-2018.pdf (p8)

** According to Cass Sunstein, the law is not only intended to define rules; in some cases, it has an expressive function, that is, it expresses a collective social norm. See Sunstein (2019).

possible consumer information, if shops do not offer sustainable or healthy products, or if prices remain too high in relation to income, no change will be possible" (RAC & Solagro, 2019), thus adopting an economic (existence of a sustainable product supply and its cost) and socio-technical (physical accessibility of products) interpretation of sustainable food.

Note: identifying the interpretive framework(s) used in a debate enables the clarification of how the public authority's role is envisaged by the various actors: each interpretive framework carries within it a specific conception of the problem to address, a vision of the individual (homo economicus, homo sapiens, consumer, spiritual being, social being, etc.) and of the public action to be implemented.

For us, this clarification work seems crucial for the democratic debate on sustainable lifestyles: what are the factors that condition our dietary, mobility, consumption and working

behaviours? What kind of hierarchy can we establish? What would be the implications (economic, social, ethical, etc.) of public action? Are these implications acceptable and proportionate? It is only by collectively carrying out this analysis that we can agree on the legitimate public action to lead a transition towards more sustainable lifestyles. And this political legitimacy must be periodically re-evaluated: changes in society, technology, environmental constraints, etc., permanently alter our appreciation of what is acceptable and what is not. An example, which although anecdotal, illustrates this point very well: until 1956 it was common practice in France to allow children to drink alcohol in school; and a public outcry was triggered when the State finally banned the practice, events that seem implausible by today's standards.⁴

2. THE ISSUE OF FREEDOM IS CONSIDERED DIFFERENTLY DEPENDING ON THE INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK

The debate on sustainable lifestyles therefore calls for different interpretive frameworks, each focusing on certain determinants of human behaviour.⁵ Their identification makes it possible to clarify the representations of legitimate public action, particularly regarding the respect of freedom.⁶

Indeed, all of these interpretive frameworks are justified (sometimes implicitly) in relation to the question of freedom. For some, changes do not imply any restrictions. Economists who advocate a carbon tax will thus say that it is not obligatory and that it enables the "maintenance of the principle of freedom while making citizens and businesses responsible by applying the polluter-pays principle",⁷ which makes it possible to change behaviour. Proponents of technological innovation claim that it preserves freedom (the freedom to not change) by offering technical alternatives for unchanged usages (cellular meat, electric cars). In the same vein, proponents of a behavioural approach based on our cognitive biases believe that we can change our behaviour by changing the environment of our daily choices (for example, by putting a vegetarian option on a menu), through an approach that is "flexible and non-invasively paternalistic, that does not prohibit anything or restrict anyone's options, [...] that aims to help people make decisions that improve their lives without infringing on the freedom of others" (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008).

For other interpretive frameworks, the change could even be liberating. In his encyclical, Pope Francis addressed the ecological

crisis from a spiritual perspective, and he thus considers that "sobriety, when lived freely and consciously, is liberating" (Pope Francis, 2015), in contrast to the usually restrictive and negative perception of sobriety. In the context of food, this can be related to the observed rationale of searching for meaning through regaining control over one's diet (e.g., veganism and concern for animal suffering).⁸ On another level, some consider that diet can be constrained by the availability of food in shopping areas, workplace catering, and the infrastructure available in homes; acting on these supply-side constraints would enable the broadening of the scope of what is possible and thus regain freedom (e.g. action by the City of Paris to improve access to sustainable food for all).⁹ By putting the keys to the transition in the hands of the consumer, the approach to sustainable consumption is based on the consumer's freedom of choice, and on the information and tools that support or even reinforce it (e.g. apps, labels, etc.). Finally, certain interpretive frameworks tend to lead to a redefinition of the perception of freedom. By considering that current social norms, which are the product of history and conventions, are constraints on our lifestyles (e.g. that a nutritious family meal must include meat), we can see the transition to new lifestyles as a simple collective redefinition of what is desirable and positive.¹⁰ And while regulation can reduce the freedom to undertake and consume (e.g. banning the sale of certain products), it is to the benefit of a society that is better able to cope with the impact of environmental crises, and therefore has more freedom in the long term.

3. FOOD FOR DEBATE

Each of the arguments presented here can be discussed and debated. The freedom of the consumer depends on the available alternative consumption choice, and therefore on the supply; the carbon tax preserves above all the freedom of those who can easily pay it and maintain the same behaviour; the change in social norms constrains those whose values make them resistant to these changes, etc. The fact that each justification can be contradicted can fuel a democratic debate, and this can be most productive at the level of specific sectors (e.g. food, local mobility, etc.). It is then a matter of discussing the relevance of the register (is it the right way to consider the issue?) and of its practical implementation, and therefore the legitimacy of public

⁴ See "1956 : interdiction de l'alcool dans les cantines scolaires". L'Œil de l'INA. Available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_Ez2RMjwuA

⁵ These interpretive frameworks are not mutually exclusive: the same individual can therefore use different interpretive frameworks to analyse a lifestyle change.

⁶ Here we use the term freedom as the set of abilities required to achieve the elements that make it possible to lead one's lifestyle and what constitutes this lifestyle (consumption practices, place of living, mobility choices, diet, etc.).

⁷ Gollier, C. (2019). Interview in L'Opinion, 8 August 2019.

⁸ See for example Baromètre de la perception de l'alimentation, 2010, Credoc. For an example of the search for meaning through new diets: see paleo diets <https://www.avise-info.fr/alimentaire/regime-paleo-des-consommateurs-en-quete-de-sens>

⁹ Paris Strategy for Sustainable Food: https://www.api-site.paris.fr/paris/public/2018%2F9%2FStrat%C3%A9gie_Paris_Aliment_Durable_Version%20Web.pdf

¹⁰ In response to a question about the Green Dictatorship, P. Bihoux answers: "Desire is imitation: I only desire what others desire [...] In the future, it will be an aberration to drive a car that weighs a tonne or more. So what? Cars were much smaller in the 1960s and 1970s, but these decades are regarded as years of freedom in the collective imagination. References and norms are constantly evolving..." <https://carnetsdalerte.en/2020/02/04/quelle-transition-ecologique/>

action: what are the impacts of the carbon tax on the freedom to move and how can these impacts be reduced? How would people on a lower income experience this concept of a more sustainable diet?

This framing of the debate on the transition towards more sustainable lifestyles shows that any lifestyle change as part of the ecological transition does not automatically amount to a loss of freedom: it can be neutral or even experienced as liberating. This also leads us to broaden our thinking to encompass the constraints of today's society, regardless of what the future of the ecological transition will be: am I satisfied with my current diet,¹¹ my daily mobility,¹² and with my employment conditions? Freedom is a fundamental value and discussions on the subject should probably not be limited to environmental policies. It is a cornerstone of society that must be constantly reinvented, all the more so at a time when the environmental price of our material abundance is being strongly felt.¹³ Finally, we must remember that to judge the acceptability of public action on our lifestyles, we must also look at the underlying democratic process. In other words, the way in which our democratic institutions will investigate, question and implement the issue is as important as the content of public policy. And both the yellow vests crisis and the Citizens' Convention on Climate initiative have shown, each in its own way, the importance of thinking about new collective procedures for debate and decision-making.

¹¹ See for example reasons for dissatisfaction (p13): https://www.ania.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/etude-ania-opinionway-les_francais-et-l-alimentation.pdf

¹² See the work of the Forum Vie Mobile, for example <https://fr.forumviesmobiles.org/projet/2019/01/07/enquete-nationale-mobilite-et-modes-vie-12796>

¹³ Pierre Charbonnier concludes his book *Abondance et Liberté* with the need to reinvent freedom and autonomy to adapt to the anthropocene context. The ecological project must be the bearer of new forms of autonomy.

4. ORGANISING THE DEBATE

An in-depth analysis of lifestyles, their evolution and the acceptability of this evolution within the framework of the ecological transition will require the management of the diversity of existing interpretive frameworks to organize the political process: how can visions be compared, how can we deliberate, how can we build an action agenda? Inspiration can be drawn from the analogy with the French National Debate on Energy Transition: in 2013, IDDRI explained its approach to the debate by pointing out that: "energy scenarios make it possible to translate different visions or normative aspirations in a quantitative way. They explore the choices made and ensure the coherence of sometimes highly contrasting narratives, thus making it possible to study the feasibility and impacts of these mobilising visions" (Bellevrat *et al.*, 2013). It is by openly confronting the normative biases, but also the uncertainties specific to each vision, that collective deliberation can function.

This work involves both experts and citizens, and scenarios can be effective tools for dialogue between the two. Today, the most urgent challenge is to make the assumptions about lifestyle changes explicit in all scenarios and to progressively understand how they can be better embodied (Saujot and Waisman, 2020). Without this, debate is not possible. The interpretive frameworks proposed in this *Issue Brief* can facilitate this work by providing a basis for the different mechanisms that can be mobilized in the transition scenarios. For example, clarifying the diversity of disciplines that explain lifestyle changes can facilitate the necessary multidisciplinary foresight work. Lastly, citizen participation must nurture these foresight studies and the fact that individuals approach an issue in a broad diversity of ways should not be interpreted as an inability to reach an agreement. Indeed, as explained by Godard (2004), the preferences of individuals are not rigid, and they can be adapted to the situation at hand. This is what citizen participation is all about: going beyond an individual's initial perception, discussing the different forms of possible change and their legitimacy, and building new collective preferences from this diversity.

See also the methodological appendix (in French) and bibliographical references on the presentation page of this Issue Brief on the IDDRI website. →

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