The Utopias of Political Consumerism: The Search for Alternatives to Mass Consumption

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This paper focuses on political consumerism understood as a social movement in which a network of individual and collective actors criticize and try to differentiate themselves from traditional consumerism by politicizing the act of buying in order to search and promote other types of consumption. In this respect they adopt a series of actions that have a collective goal but that can be either individual or collective (boycott, buycott).

This paper is based on a comparison of four cases in France and in the United Kingdom: two convivia of Slow Food and two more radical groups: de-growth promoters and people living in an ecovillage. The angle used in this research is utopia understood both as a discourse that includes, first, a rejection of the existing society, and, second, if not a clear conception of what another world might look like, at least the idea that another society is possible and desirable, and a set of practices that need to be an attempt to create here and now at least some of the features of this utopian discourse in the hope of it spreading to the rest of society.

Viewing political consumerism with the lenses of utopia can help understand how actors view consumption and how they link their acts of (non-)consuming to ideals and dreams of a better world. Utopia helps to show that the particular choices of consumption, of lifestyle or the choices collectively made are only really understandable if one looks at the logics behind them and their articulation to the ideals and hopes actors have. It can also help us see how actors articulate the individual and collective level of action since it shows that for the actors their everyday choices of living are also done in order to achieve some necessary changes within society.
Many observers of political participation have noticed a trend toward both a relative decline of conventional participation – such as voting or membership to a political party – and an attraction for unconventional participation as well as a broadening of the repertoires used. Besides traditional demonstrations, strikes and petitions, which constitute part of the modern repertoire of contention (Tilly 1986), new activities have emerged and been more widely used such as market-based actions, email petitions, die-ins and street parties, just to name a few (Sommier 2003, 131-224; Forno and Ceccarini 2006, 197). In this context, the use of market-based actions is of particular interest because the figures of the consumer and of the citizen have long been opposed, preventing a generalization of actions based on consumption. This is not to say that consumption has never been a tool of political action. The boycott has a long history and has been used in a variety of contexts such as the American revolution, Gandhi’s struggle for India’s independence, or the civil right movement in the United States. However, actions involving consumption have recently expanded both in number and in variety with the spread of “buycott” – the act of intentionally buying a product to support a cause – of organic or fair-trade products for instance, or the recourse to ethical banking, ethical tourism, etc. Therefore, the potential power of consumers has become of interest and has been scrutinized by a growing number of scholars.

This interest for these forms of actions in the economic sphere is quite recent and, for a long time, mainstream political science, sociology or psychology have tended to neglect this form of repertoire of action (Princen, Maniates, and Conca 2002, 9-11). However, this repertoire has recently been the subject of an increasing interest by scholars coming from various fields. Several labels have emerged to define the actions in the market that are purposely done to serve a cause: anti-consumerism, political consumerism, green consumption, ethical consumption, engaged or responsible consumption, and, closely related, voluntary simplicity and downshifting. These terms do not always have the same boundaries and have been variously defined. This article proposes to focus on political consumerism understood as a specific social movement. Indeed, political consumerism is one of the terms that appears the most often and it allows the investigation of the motivations behind the choices to be part of such a movement. Therefore, the goal of this study is to present political consumerism and to observe it through particular lenses: its utopias.
Utopia is a concept that is often overlooked in the study of social movements in general and of political consumerism more specifically. However, it is useful to capture some important dimensions of collective actions that are dreams, ideals or hope. In the common sense, utopia is often understood as an unrealistic dream. However, once detached from the notion of realism or unrealism, the notion of utopia includes certain forms of hope that are important for social movements. Therefore, this article argues, first, that, if properly defined and articulated with the theories of social movements, utopia can be a useful tool to pinpoint some overlooked aspects of collective action such as its imaginary dimension or the hope it can convey among people and, second, that this is particularly revealing for actors involved in political consumerism. Thus, the first part of this article will be devoted to defining political consumerism and describing the empirical study that has been undertaken. Then, utopia will be defined and applied to political consumerism. Finally, since utopia is viewed as a tool that can be used to get a better understanding of social movements, this paper will end with a brief description of some of the consequences of utopia on political consumerists.

WHAT IS POLITICAL CONSUMERISM?

The term “political consumerism” has been popularized by Michele Micheletti and has been used since then by other authors (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005; Holzer 2006; Dubuisson-Quellier 2009). Micheletti focused on people who view the market as an arena for politics and has defined political consumerism as follows:

“"It represents actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices. Their choices are based on attitudes and values regarding issues of justice, fairness, or noneconomic issues that concern personal and family well-being and ethical or political assessment of favorable and unfavorable business and government practice. Political consumers are the people who engage in such choice situations. They may act individually or collectively. Their market choices reflect an understanding of material products as embedded in a complex social and normative context." (2003, 2)

However, her definition raises several difficulties. First, political consumerism can include more things than she describes – that is, boycotts, buycotts, and ethical investing –, such as other forms of actions against what are seen as bad practices of corporations or actions designed to promote alternative ways of consuming. Our understanding of
political consumerism would thus also include actions such as culture jamming, voluntary simplicity or the choice to live in an ecovillage.

Moreover, Micheletti’s description of political consumerism is confusing because it mixes up two different realities: a specific repertoire of action that can be used for various goals and a social movement that has a collective identity and a specific discourses. Therefore, it is essential to differentiate between two terms that describe two different phenomena:

- **Political consumption**, also called **ethical consumption** (Harrison, Newholm, and Shaw 2005), is a repertoire of action that consumers can use and that involves boycott, buycott, ethical investment, etc. This repertoire can be used in various contexts and by different social movements actors.

- **Political consumerism** is a critique of consumer society and of traditional consumerism, understood as “referring not to the consumption of goods and services *per se*, but to the endlessly desirous and routinely wasteful consumption of affluent economies” (Humphery 2010, XI).

For instance, Dietlind Stolle, Marg Hooghe and Michele Micheletti talk about the boycott of French food and wines when President Jacques Chirac opposed the war in Iraq (2005). In this example, the repertoire of “political consumption” is used but not with a goal belonging to the ideology of “political consumerism.” Inversely, a mock right-wing demonstration denouncing, via the use of humour and irony, our consumer society belongs to “political consumerism” without using a tool of “political consumption.” It is thus very important to make a clear distinction between these two phenomena that are often linked but are not coterminous.

Therefore, I have defined political consumerism as follows. **Political consumerism is a social movement in which a network of individual and collective actors criticize and try to differentiate themselves from traditional consumerism by politicizing the act of buying in order to search and promote other types of consumption.** In this respect, they adopt a series of actions that have a collective goal but can be either individual or collective. I refer to them as **collectivized individual actions** since, on the one hand, they are mainly individual actions that imply specific choices of lifestyle, and on the other, they only acquire meaning once they are performed by many people and publicized by an organized collective actor. They include, for instance, boycott, buycott, the purchase of
organic or fair-trade products, culture jamming, voluntary simplicity or the act of living in an ecovillage.¹

Political consumerism is viewed here as a social movement in the sense given by Mario Diani, that is, “a distinct social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engaged in collective action: are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks; share a distinct collective identity” (della Porta and Diani 2006, 20). It is beyond the scope of this article to verify empirically this assumption. However, from the results of this research and the review of the literature on the subject it can be hypothesized that these actors have conflictual relations with targeted opponents such as corporations, the state or the mainstream media; they are linked with each other either physically through common actions or more abstractly by referring to each other’s reflections and actions; and have a collective identity based on a common history (the tradition of boycotts or the history of cooperatives for instance), on common intellectual figures such as Guy Debord, and, maybe even more importantly, on common practices such as the collectivized individual actions mentioned above, etc.

Nevertheless, it is legitimate to wonder if political consumerism is a social movement as such or only part of another one, namely the ecological movement. Indeed, environmental questions are very important for the actors involved in political consumerism and can be seen as one of the common trait between them. This would mean that, within the ecological movement, it would be possible to differentiate between those who see consumer society as an anti-ecological system and those who would not be as concerned about consumption problems. Moreover, some of the issues raised by the global justice movement (GJM) are also present in the concerns of political activists in the sense of a defence of the workers both in the North and in the South (with the promotion of fair trade) and the criticism of neoliberal globalization (with the will to relocalize the economy for instance). Therefore, one can make the hypothesis that the networks that compose different social movements may partially overlap. Thus, it is possible to picture three circles: the GJM, the ecological movement and political consumerism.

¹ These actions have also been called “individualized collective actions” by Michele Micheletti (2003; 2004) while Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier has talked about “individualized acts of specific practices” or of “neo-consumerist collective actions” (2007, 210).
Political consumerism, or at least most of it, belongs to both the GJM and the ecological movement in the area where they overlap. However, some groups may belong to political consumerism without belonging to the GJM or the ecological movement, and some groups belonging to both the ecological movement and the GJM may not belong to political consumerism. The frontiers of these movements are of course very blurry and it is impossible to state precisely where one stops and the other begins.

Moreover, it must be stated that political consumerism consists of a spectrum of individual and collective actors that goes from alter-consumerism (it promotes the notion of a “consum-actor” and attempts at reforming consumer society) to anti-consumerism (it is a more radical form of consumer rebellion, with a clear rejection of consumer society and capitalism). There is no rupture in this spectrum because they have common values but this does not mean that they agree on everything and there are also vivid debates among the activists (Crettiez and Sommier 2006).

Finally, it must be stated that the concept of social movement must be used carefully in order to avoid reifying a reality that is constantly evolving. Therefore, it has been used here not so much as an object that could be empirically apprehended during a fieldwork.

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2 In this graphic, political consumerism is seen as being part of either the ecological movement or the GJM (or both) but never independent from either of them. Indeed, from the information gathered during this research and in the literature on the subject, it seems that the politicization of consumption is often, if not always, associated with economic, social and/or ecological issues. However, this assumption is not a firm one and one can assume that some groups might belong to political consumerism without belonging to either the ecological movement or the GJM. This would mean that the circle of political consumerism would be partly independent from the two other circles.
but as an useful tool to observe the individual and collective actors under study. Indeed, viewing political consumerism as a social movement allows to observe analytically it as a space in the sense given by Lilian Mathieu. According to him, the space of social movements is “a universe of practices and meanings relatively autonomous inside the social world, and in which mobilizations are united by relations of interdependency.” (2007, 133). In that understanding, and to go back to the logic of circles expressed earlier, the space of social movements would be a big circle in which every social movement would be situated, each of them being itself a circle interlinked with some of the others. By viewing social movements as spaces, observers can thus locate each actor both in relations to the other actors as network analysis does or according to their views on the structural debates or cleavages that are internal to each social movement. In the case of political consumerism, two important structural cleavages have been pointed out: the cleavage between alter-consumerism and anti-consumerism, therefore between a moderate view and a radical view of political consumerism; and the cleavage between the social concerns and the ecological concerns. From these two cleavages, it is possible to draw an analytical map and locate the various actors within it.

To put it simply, moderate groups are on the left, radical groups on the right of the graphic. The vertical axis deals with the social/environmental cleavage. This must be

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3 In that sense it is relatively similar to the understanding of social movement industry as developed by John McCarthy and Mayer Zald (1977) or of a Bourdieusian vision of a field. As for Nick Crossley, he has talked of the “field of contestation” (2003).
seen as a ratio. The groups at the top of the graphic tend to be more socially oriented, while the groups at the bottom put more emphasis on the environment. The groups that place as much import on the social and the environmental aspects of political consumerism are located in the middle of the axis. For scholars willing to study political consumerism as a social movement, it is then useful to locate the actors in such a map in order to see the links between each of them, their relations as well as their common ideological views and disagreements. From there, it becomes interesting to see how this positioning influences the discourse and behaviour of the actors playing in this space.

The goal of this article is not to map political consumerists but it was important to explain how political consumerism is apprehended in the frame of this study in order to understand how the case studies were approached and how the fieldwork was done. Indeed, if many scholars start by looking at consumers (Princen, Maniates, and Conca 2002; Micheletti 2003; Andersen and Tobiasen 2004; Harrison, Newholm, and Shaw 2005; Dubuisson-Quellier 2009), the starting point of the empirical work of this research was social movement organizations. This choice has an impact on the data collected since the individuals were not only people using consumption as a tool to achieve a goal (in the sense of political or ethical consumption described earlier) but also getting involved in some more or less organized collectives belonging to political consumerism. Therefore, the findings of this research must be looked at keeping this element in mind: this research is on political consumerism and not on political consumption.

**Brief Description of the case studies**

A qualitative and comparative case study has been realized inside this social movement. It focused on four groups that belong to it: two local groups of the Slow Food organization, some supporters of the theory of de-growth\(^4\) that are linked with an organization named the Casseurs de Pub, and the members of an ecovillage, Redfield. These groups are located in two countries: France and the United Kingdom. This study encompasses the two extremes of political consumerism since Slow Food can be ranged in the category of alter-consumerism and the growth objectors as well as the members

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\(^4\) I will also call them “growth objectors” since it is the term they use to call themselves.
of Redfield can be categorized as anti-consumerists. However, all these groups are located in the same side of the second cleavage: their ecological concern is relatively superior to their social concern.

Slow Food is an organization that was created in 1986 in Bra, Italy, and has become international in 1989. It comprises, at the international level, around 85,000 members spread in more than 1,000 local groups, called “convivia.” It is based on the promotion of a “good, clean and fair” food, on the defence of biodiversity, taste education, and on the linkage between producers and consumers. Two convivia have been studied, one in Lyon and the other in Oxford.

The Casseurs de Pub are an organization that has been created in 1999 and that promotes the theory of de-growth by publishing a magazine, Casseurs de Pub and a monthly newspaper, La Décroissance. Every month, they organize the wrapping of the newspaper for the subscribers during which volunteers come to give a hand. Most of the interviewees were such volunteers. The main mission of the Casseurs de Pub is the promotion of de-growth. De-growth is both a theory and a network of actors. It comes from a simple observation done by its promoters: an infinite growth is not possible in a world with finite resources. Thus growth objectors criticize the ideology of growth and consumption and look for alternatives at the individual and collective levels, de-growth being the collective solution and voluntary simplicity the individual one.

Finally, Redfield is an intentional community located in Buckinghamshire that is affiliated with the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). An intentional community can be defined as a group of people who have decided to live together with the goal to pursue a common ideal. An ecovillage is an intentional community for which the ecological concern is central: its members search to reduce as much as possible their environmental footprint (Bang 2005; Dawson 2006).

In these four groups, some participant observation was conducted as well as individual interviews meant to grasp the perceptions actors have of their involvement in this movement.
THE UTOPIAS OF POLITICAL CONSUMERISM

Political consumerism in general, and the four case studies in particular, have been the basis of this study of utopia. Thus, the goal has been, once the concept of utopia defined, to identify the utopian elements that could be found empirically and to describe them in order, first, to get a better picture of political consumerism and, second, to understand their impact on the actors involved in it.

Definition of utopia

Despite a prolific literature, there is no consensual definition of utopia especially if one searches for a definition that could be applied to the study of collective action. Therefore, the definition used for this research was built to be large enough to include all forms of utopia within social movements and operational enough to give researchers a series of indicators to allow an empirical observation of the phenomenon.

Very broadly speaking, utopia includes both a form of discourse and a set of particular practices. To be called utopian, a discourse has to include, first, a rejection of the existing society, and second, if not a clear conception of what another world might look like, at least the idea that another society is possible and desirable. And, to be called utopian, practices need to be an attempt to create here and now at least some of the features of this utopian discourse, in the hope of it spreading to the rest of society.

Moreover, it can be found at different levels of analysis and the hypothesis is made that it is possible to find individual utopias, collective utopias and meta-utopias. The individual utopia comes from a state of mind, a belief that society can and should be transformed, that change is desirable, and from what William Gamson has called the “agency component” of collective action frames, that is “the consciousness that it is possible to alter conditions or policies through collective action” (1995, 90). The collective utopia is instead found at the level of the group or the social movement organization (SMO). Contrary to the individual utopia, it is a collective construct stemming from a process of constant negotiation which takes place through the repeated interaction of the members of the group. Finally, the meta-utopia is found at the level of the social movement as a whole; it is also a collective construct but at a higher and more general level.
Finally, utopia has three dimensions that are essential to differentiate analytically. The first dimension is the structure of the utopia discourse with a particular grammar; the second dimension is the particularities of the utopia practices (the attempt to put some coherence between one’s actions and one’s ideals and to adapt the means to the ends), and the third one is the emotional work implied in the construction of utopia, mainly the joy of imagining alternatives and the hope they will improve society. These three dimensions are to be empirically observed if one wants to talk of utopia within a particular social movement.

The meta-utopia of political consumerism

The goal of this definition of utopia is to be useful in an empirical research in order to allow for the identification – or not – of utopian elements within the context of a social movement. Therefore, once this theoretical work is done, the second step has been to test it in the fieldwork done on the four case studies mentioned above. This has meant identifying whether the actors understood themselves has being utopian and what their understanding of utopia was. Then, at the level of political consumerism in general, it has meant looking for utopian elements that were common to all actors claiming their belonging to this movement.

What is utopia for political consumerists?

During the fieldwork, the interviewees did not know the object of the research was utopia. Therefore, I did not mention my own definition of the term but asked them, at the end of the interview, what ideas they associated with it. From the literature on utopia, no general agreement on a definition can be found, so it is with no surprise that no agreed-upon definition came up during the interviews either. Some similarities nonetheless emerged. When the word was used, it mainly referred to the idea of unrealistic dreams. But it was not always negative and some actors explained that it was nevertheless useful, needed, or a good direction to head towards. Finally, beyond the word “utopia” in itself, the notion of a change of society implied by the definition of utopia was very important in the discourse of political consumerists. The idea that society needs a profound change came up several times in the interviews, as well as in the literature written by intellectuals of the movement.
The three dimensions (discursive, practical and emotional) of utopia were observed during the fieldwork. It is thus possible to assert that these activists have individual utopias. The fact that these utopias were similar among the members of the groups allowed me to talk of collective utopias. Finally, by considering political consumerism as a social movement, it should be possible to observe a meta-utopia that is transversal to the movement. Since my study was qualitative and based on groups that are not representative of the whole body of actors that belong to political consumerism, my goal was not to observe utopia at this level. However, I developed some hypotheses concerning the main lines of the meta-utopia of political consumerism based on the data of this study and the literature on the subject. Two elements emerge: the importance of consumption as a vehicle of change and the search for alternatives that go beyond traditional militancy.

**Consumption as a tool to change society**

The centrality of consumption is not a surprise since it is both the main repertoire of actions of these activists and it is at the centre of the discourse of this movement (Princen, Maniates, and Conca 2002; Binkley 2009; Humphery 2010). The figure of the consumer is thus presented either as an actor with a power to change things – at the condition that s/he becomes a “consum-actor” – or as something that should be rejected to the benefit of the figure of the citizen. We go back here to the essence of the rupture between alter-consumerism and anti-consumerism, the promoters of the former thinking that it is possible to reform the system by regulating the market while the promoters of the latter believing that there is a need of a more radical rupture with capitalism and consumer society, notably by advocating the “consumption strike” (Ariès 2006). This internal debate can be found at the level of the four groups studied here. The members of Slow Food were quite well inscribed in the logic of alter-consumerism with the ideas of creating a “good, clean, and fair” economic system and promoting the “critical or ethical consumer” (Andrews 2008, 86-87) while the growth objectors and the members of Redfield tended to recognize themselves more in the anti-consumerist discourse. However, all of them agreed with the centrality of consumption: classic forms of consumption were criticized and alternatives were searched for, either in other forms of consumption or in the refusal of consumption. This led actors to shape “alternative views of the market” (Sassatelli 2009, 34) and to invest the market as a space of action.
(Dubuisson-Quellier 2009, 133) as well as to create among themselves spaces where other logics of consumption and alternative lifestyles were experimented (see also Kozinets 2002).

“Going beyond the politics of protest”

This brings us directly to the second element of this meta-utopia of political consumerism: its will to go beyond traditional militancy by encouraging the promotion of alternatives. This involves notably the collectivized individual actions of political consumerism. In this meta-utopia, these actions are presented as attempts to create positive alternatives (Balsiger 2009). As Geoff Andrews explains, talking about Slow Food:

“Slow Food has normally avoided boycotts and campaigns against supermarkets or fast food stores, preferring to focus on developing links with small producers and alternative forms of economic and social development. As Rainer Riedi, leader of the Bunder Herrshaft convivium in Switzerland, told me: Slow Food is ‘not only a movement against but [also about] how things can be in the future’. (2008, 87)

The actors thus prefer to concentrate their energy in saying yes to something rather than saying no to the existing world (Dawson 2006, 87). During the interviews, many people have denied being activists. Indeed, while recognizing the use of traditional activism, they preferred adapting their lifestyle to their ideals and promoting it. This promotion, accompanied by the need to educate people, is thus fundamental for political consumerism whose collectivized individual actions really become meaningful once publicized and adopted by a large segment of the population. For instance, Steven, a member of Redfield, summed up this view on activism by saying:

“I could never be a protester, it’s not in me... [Silence] Yeah... Me: How come do you think you couldn’t be a protester? Well, I could be, if I was really wild or angry about something but it’s just not... Ever since I got involved with anything, since I started being slightly alternative or whatever... I’m so glad there are people out there protesting against whether... be it airports or GM or whatever! ‘Cause it’s not my thing. I don’t know why, it’s not my thing. I’m more of a... ‘get on with it and do it kind of guy.’ I will never buy a GM product consciously... It’s not easy. [Laughter] You know, things like that, I just... I just prefer to get on and do things...”

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5 I nonetheless use the term to define them. As for the qualification of utopian, they do not need to call themselves as such to enter the category.

6 The names of the interviewees have been changed for purpose of anonymity.
Other features of the collective utopias

Therefore, the meta-utopia of political consumerism comes from a critique of consumer society and of the figure of traditional consumers to promote alternatives either based on the interventions of the consum-actor, or based on the refusal of consumption. Other elements observed during my fieldwork might not be found in political consumerism as a whole but are nonetheless important to the collective utopias of these groups. They include the idea of a necessity to slow things down, an epicurean dimension and a political dimension.

Utopias of slowness

Concerning the necessity to slow things down, the four groups all belong in a way or another to what has been called by some commentators the “slow movement” (Honoré 2004; Parkins and Craig 2006). Indeed, if Slow Food is the most emblematic figure of this movement, the de-growth supporters and the members of Redfield all share a reflection on the pace of time that is integrated to their utopia. At the origin of this reflection, there is the criticism of the cult of speed (“Fast Life” in the Slow Food Manifesto). During the interviews, several activists talked about “a rat race” that is so present in our society. This criticism of the pace of time is linked, for them, to their ecological concern: we need to slow down and do it, paradoxically, quickly, otherwise it will be too late to save the planet. The idea of necessity is thus very present: slow down or perish. Some intellectuals of the theory of de-growth have talked of “De-growth or chaos” (Cheynet 2008) or “De-growth or Barbarism” (Ariès 2005).

Therefore, the political consumerists of these four groups have developed what can be called an “art of slowing down” as a solution to change the world. People should not rush in doing what they do; they should stop and reflect about their choices of lifestyle; give more meaning to their time; do less things but take pleasure in doing them. Furthermore, people should spend more time doing things they truly enjoy, such as spending time with friends or family, cooking a good meal, reading, walking, or just doing nothing. For instance, when asked about the differences between community living and life in more classic settings, Thelma, a member of Redfield, said:

“And I think also the pace of life is... no, I suppose I was going to say pace is slower but it’s not, really... [Laughter] It just seems more enjoyable because I’m doing things that I enjoy.
So, in a way, I’m spending my free time doing the things that I enjoy when actually they’re part of my community work... [Silence] And it feels like I have more free time because I’m doing the things that I enjoy. [...] So, I suppose that it’s not that life is slower, it’s just more enjoyable and so therefore it feels as though I’m not rushing around doing as much.”

Therefore, no matter the activity, the importance is to put some significance in it and invest time and energy in purposeful actions. This art of slowing down can be found in many practices of these groups and is also put forward very openly by two of these groups, Slow Food and the Casseurs de Pub with a recurrent reference to the snail. The idea to slow down is thus very present in the utopias of these four groups.

**Epicurean utopias**

The four groups studied are influenced by a form of epicurean philosophy which is concretised through a combination of two main aspects: an emphasis on pleasure and conviviality and the notion of simplicity. Concerning the notion of pleasure, it stems from one of the elements of the emotional work done by utopia: the transformation of anger and grievance into a more positive emotional energy (Collins 2001) by stimulating the joy of imagining other worlds, the pleasure of being together, the pride in taking action, etc. One way of reinforcing this notion of pleasure is by giving conviviality a centrality both in the discourses and in the practices of the groups. Thus, every action undertaken by Slow Food, for instance, involves food tasting or drinking a good wine in order to add fun to the collective action (even if food or wine tasting is not the direct theme of the action). Pleasure and conviviality are thus at the heart of Slow Food. As Eveline, one member of the French convivium, put it,

“...And the goal of the organization, it’s also to give to people the will to eat simple and good products and to take the time to prepare them To take the time to sit down around a table and to revive, find back this conviviality around food. As soon as people have pleasure eating... because the word 'pleasure' is important... Slow Food is not necessarily an activists' movement, hard-line, but it’s a movement that is encouraging people to revive the pleasure to eat. [Silence] And for us, the pleasure we have inside the organization also, to see each other once a month... This group of people in a city, for instance, it’s called a convivium because we look for conviviality, we meet, we are a dozen of persons, more or less, we meet to discuss what we’re going to do, how we’re going to act and then we take advantage of that to savour products that we have located, that we like, that we want others to discover... And we work like that.”

The idea of conviviality is also present among the growth objectors and the Casseurs de Pub whose newspaper’s full title is “La Décroissance. Le journal de la joie de vivre.”

Behind the events organized, the idea that shapes their internal organization is: work
should be as pleasurable as possible and our days should be spent as nicely as possible. The same can be said for the organization of Redfield.

In parallel to the idea of pleasure, an emphasis on simplicity is also at the heart of the epicurean dimension of these utopias. This is very strong with the growth objectors who promote the idea of “voluntary simplicity” but it can also be found in the logic of the promotion of simple cooking in Slow Food and of simple living in Redfield. The search for pleasure and the notion of simplicity might appear as contradictory, especially when the ecological concern is added in the picture, but activists try to resolve it in their own way (de Geus 2009; Soper 2009). For instance, Slow Food has developed the concept of “eco-gastronomy” which is a combination of ecological concern with the pleasures of cooking and eating good products. Carlo Petrini, the leader of Slow Food International, has justified this concept by saying: a “gastronome who is not an ecologist is stupid, while an ecologist who is not a gastronome is sad” (quote found in Andrews 2008, 20).

Similarly, the search for solutions that link a meaningful and happy community life with a sustainable impact on Earth is at the core of the principles of ecovillages in general, and of Redfield in particular. The solutions are thus, depending on the actors, a search for sustainable pleasures either through green consumption or by turning away from consumption to rediscover other non-consumable pleasures in the interaction with others.

**Political utopias**

Besides the reflection on the pace of time and their epicurean dimension, the utopias of these four groups also integrate a political dimension. It is important to begin by saying that all groups were not as political and that there was a national divide between them, the French groups being more politicized than the British ones.7 Beyond that, the group that gives the most importance to politics in its utopian discourse is the Casseurs de Pub for which individual actions such as voluntary simplicity are useless without a relay in the political field. Nicolas Ridoux who has written a book explaining and promoting the de-growth theory thus says:

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7 This divide might be explained by a difference in the traditions of activism in the two countries. Indeed, it can be assumed that the French tend to turn more easily to the state in case of problems whereas the British have a stronger tradition of militancy that is more independent from politics through various charities or NGOs (della Porta 2007).
“De-growth will be able to grow only if both approaches, horizontal and vertical, are simultaneously followed. Horizontal by the emulation between citizens and vertical by collective organization, the necessary delegation of speech, this representation without which it is not possible to be heard distinctly and to exist in the political structures that rule our planet today.” (2006, 147)

Concerning Slow Food, the political tool is promoted, at the international level of the organization, as a vector for change and, in Italy for instance, strong connections exist between Slow Food and various political institutions, mainly at the local and regional levels but also nationally. However, it appeared in the interviews done both in France and in the UK that politics was not an easy subject. It was hardly talked about within the convivia, which can be explained by their desire to avoid unnecessary potential conflicts. Finally, in Redfield, the inhabitants explained that politics was hardly a subject of debates, not out of discomfort but more because of a feeling of consensus and also, in a way, a perceived lack of interest.

In all groups, most members emphasized the importance of the political dimension of their struggle but many also differentiated between political in the sense of ethics, or values, and politics in the sense of political parties and concrete reforms – issues that most members of Slow Food, for instance, preferred to keep for their private sphere or their own parallel engagement in politics if they had one. Therefore, the political aspect of these collective utopias was expressed through the idea of the responsibility of the whole community in front of the problems that society faces and by the importance given to collective action and political involvement. Indeed, they all agreed on the idea that it is at the level of the whole society that change must occur if one wants to save the planet. Finally, most of the French activists met and a few of the British ones had also been involved (at the time of the fieldwork or previously) in politics through membership in a political party, an involvement in a political campaign, or by being candidates in local and/or national elections. Therefore, it is possible to say that the political dimension is present in each of these collective utopias in various forms.

THE CONSEQUENCES ON THE PRATICES OF POLITICAL CONSUMERS

I have identified utopian elements in the discourses and the practices of the political consumerists that I have met. However, the goal was not to stay at this stage but to go a
little further by attempting to observe the impact that utopia had on their involvement in collective action.

Therefore, I have developed a theoretical approach of the role of utopia in social movement that I have empirically tested during my fieldwork. According to this theoretical discussion – and very briefly put –, utopia has a role in the emergence of social movements that can only appear if the belief that change is possible and desirable is present in at least some parts of society. Utopia has also a power of attraction for the groups using it by motivating people to join in order to change things; by reinforcing the collective identity of the groups and by pushing them to innovate. Finally, it has a role in the choices of the groups and the social movements by orientating these choices towards the better world that is dreamt of. This article is too short for a complete overview of the application of such a theory but my goal here is to highlight some aspects that are particularly revealing for the case of political consumerism.

The importance of the interaction between utopian discourses and utopian practices

The search for coherence between ideals and practices was clearly claimed by the political consumerists met during this research and could be found both behind the logic of individual actions and within the organization of the groups.

At the individual level, many actions conducted by political consumerists can be categorized as “collectivized individual actions” through various consumption choices and lifestyles preferences. Indeed, if activists expressed their satisfaction with their decision to get involved with these groups because their modes of action and ways of functioning were consistent with their ideals, they also tried to extend these ideals to other aspects of their lives, thus seeing a real continuity between their involvement in collective action and their everyday practices. Voluntary simplicity is a very good example of such a holistic view of engagement since it implies changes of your way of life in every area of your existence. Moreover, these choices and actions were presented as concrete solutions to start here and now to change things without waiting for actions coming from higher spheres of the political or economic world.
Finally, it is very interesting to observe that the acts are not utopian in themselves but only become so once inscribed in a logic in which they contribute (even in a small extent) to the achievement of a certain change in society. For instance, some people do not have a car simply because they cannot afford one or use a bike as a means to do some sport but, in the case of these activists, these actions were part of a certain way of life that was coherent with the utopian discourses they promoted. Many activists were also involved (or had been involved) in other organizations or groups, either in the ecological sphere, in the social sphere, or in the political field. They tended to present these involvements as being complementary to their implication with political consumerism and inscribed in the same logic of an attempt adapts the means to the ends. Many also had looked for jobs that were consistent with their life choices.

The attempt to find coherence between the discourses and the practices can also be found, beyond the acts of each individual activist, at the level of the group as a whole. Indeed, the four groups have developed certain sets of formal and informal rules that often come from a reflection that is more or less directly linked to the ideals, and thus the utopias, they promote. For instance, Redfield, the ecovillage, had developed a use of consensus for its decision-making procedures that implied that everybody agreed with the decisions and that no subgroup was formed within the community. Both convivia of Slow Food had put a strong emphasis on pleasure and conviviality in their organizing of internal meeting and of external events in order to fit with the ideals of the pleasures of slow life. And the Casseurs de Pub promoted a series of campaigns that were concrete actions to publicize de-growth and voluntary simplicity ideas, one of them being Buy Nothing Day (BND). The concept of BND, if it does not stem from the theory of de-growth is totally coherent with its main ideas. Indeed, the idea to stop buying for one day and reflect on one’s habits of consuming is at the core of the theory of de-growth. Therefore, a constant interaction between the utopian discourses and the utopian practices has been concretely observed during the fieldwork, both mutually feeding each other.

The importance of spreading the utopias

Activists viewed their actions, even the individual ones, as only meaningful if they helped to convince people of the rightness of their utopian discourse. As long as only a
few well informed people adopted the right practices the impact on the planet or on society was viewed as next to nothing. The goal, for most of them, was thus to spread the word among their fellow citizens in order to help them realize the problems of our current society and to make them adopt better practices. For instance, reflecting on his life in the community, a member of Redfield, Elliott, said:

“It’s possibly counter-productive living here in this respect, living a very low impact lifestyle and not going anywhere because I don’t get to talk to people who live these other normal lifestyles. [...] I don’t think there’s any silver bullet that’s going to... Nothing that I can say would change someone but it’s kind of a critical mass of people doing similar kinds of environmentally friendly or sustainable things, that will change people... or help change people because they are going to change themselves.”

In this perspective, several members of the community have talked of the importance of the “living in community” weekends during which Redfield opened its doors to anyone who wanted to discover community-living and. They also mentioned the importance for them to go out to pubs and talk to people. Jonathan Dawson, talking of ecovillages more generally, expressed a similar idea by saying:

“Ecovillages can be likened to yoghurt culture: small, dense and rich concentrations of activity whose aim is to transform the nature of that which surrounds them.” (2006, 66)

This publicization of the actions was also strongly emphasized by the growth objectors through their idea of articulating individual practices of voluntary simplicity with collective actions within the spaces of social movements and/or politics. Indeed, those who decided to enter politics did not do so with the idea that they could win seats but in order to use the campaigns as tribunes during which they could publicize their utopias. Finally, the members of Slow Food expressed a similar idea through the focus on education to taste. Education to taste is one of the main goals of Slow Food and it was the purpose of most of the activities that members organized, through cooking classes and food or wine tasting for instance. The members of Slow Food Oxford have organized an event at the English Children’s Food Festival during which they have tried to stimulate all five senses of children when discovering food with this idea that, in order to eat “good, clean and fair” food and appreciate it to its right value, one has to be educated to it.

Therefore, the importance given by most – if not all – members of the four case studies on education and exemplarity shows the necessity, in the views of these political consumerists, to link their collectivized individual action to more classic repertoires of actions. This is not specific to these four groups and Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier and
Julien Barrier have described this relation concerning the anti-advertisement movement in France (2007).

**The use of utopia to legitimize the struggle of political consumerism**

The utopian discourse of political consumerists should be seen as a part of their broader discourse. It has the advantage of giving them more substantial elements by offering alternative solutions both at the individual and collective levels to the problems they denounce. It also empowers them and reinforces their will to engage in collective action by giving them a way to act on things through the various collectivized individual actions they promote and gives them some hope despite the often pessimistic views of the future they have. Indeed, if most of them want to slow things down, they also think that it is urgent to do so because of the ecological crisis they believe we are in. And the concretization of their ideals, values and dreams through various practices helps them think that it is possible to do something about it, albeit at a very small scale. This also means that these acts are symbolically rewarding in the sense that they give activists the sense that they contribute to the necessary changes.

During the interviews, the idea of a choice of lifestyle came up regularly and it can be analyzed as contributing to the forming of collective identities. In a way these alter- and anti-consumerist groups can be seen as sorts of tribes that are attempting to spread their ideals and ways of life through their actions and publications (the newspaper *La Décroissance* is a good example of that, particularly its pages dedicated to examples of voluntary simplicity). Of course, none of these activists were mere followers of the discourses developed by the intellectuals of political consumerism but they all related to the other members of their groups by seeing each other regularly for events and, by enjoying the company of other like-minded people, feeling that they were not alone in their struggle for a better world.

Finally, it is also interesting to note that the utopian discourses were strategically framed and used by these political consumerists. Indeed, especially for the anti-consumerists whose discourse has less resonance with mainstream society, it is sometimes hard to exist in the public sphere (even though it has evolved and become
less true recently) because the general discourse of society still views consumption as a positive notion that is essential in times of economic crisis. Therefore, these activists were careful not to appear too unrealistic in the utopias they developed in order not to frighten potential sympathisers.

**CONCLUSION**

This article has demonstrated that political consumerism can be apprehended as a social movement with a particular discourse, some specific repertoires and a collective identity and that using utopia as a conceptual tool can shed some light on the internal logics of this movement. Indeed, by looking at the visions of the world of its activists, the values and ideals they promote and the hopes they have in potential change, observers of political consumerism can have a better understanding of their choices of actions, notably concerning the collectivized individual actions that are so important for them. These actions are not “rational” according to the neo-classic views of the *homo economicus*. The example of buycott is revealing of such an “irrationality”: the prices of organic or fair-trade products are higher, the networks of alternative consumption (such as the community-supported agriculture, or CSA) more constraining, etc. However, for actors who look for coherence between their ideals and their practices and who view mass consumption as bad for society and organic, local and fair production as an ideal to promote, such choices become logical.

Moreover, the observation of political consumerism through the lenses of utopia helps to understand why people who behave similarly might not understand each other if they do not have similar utopian discourses behind their actions. This tendency to amalgam very different actors has been quite recurrent in the studies of political consumerism. Indeed, mixing very different people such as occasional consumers of organic food (who sometimes do so for reasons that have nothing to do with political consumerism) with adepts of the theory of de-growth for instance has sometimes led to some confusion. By looking at the reasons pushing people to use some collectivized individual actions in the sphere of political consumerism, utopia helps to disentangle the logics of behaviours that are intertwined but are far from carrying the same meaning, thus enabling a better understanding of the social dynamics that animates the political consumerist movement.
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