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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## How does affluent consumption come to consumers? Research agenda for exploring the foundations and lock-ins of affluent consumption

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In the context of the calls for sufficiency held by climate experts, consumption is a major lever of ecological transition. Following numerous social sciences studies, I suggest that the belief that such an ecological transition could rest on the shoulders of consumers alone is illusory. I highlight the strong interdependencies within a political economy of affluent consumption between public policies, corporate ~~economic~~ models and consumer practices. Taking an economic sociological and Foucauldian perspective, I develop a research agenda to explore how affluent consumption becomes a legitimised and institutionalised norm. Affluent consumption, which is highly resource intensive, is structural in both economic policies of governments and business models of companies and is therefore constantly organised and governed. However, it is not imposed on individuals by force. The government of consumption is based on technologies of power that shape and orient consumers' conduct, leading them to adopt the norms of affluent consumption by activating and playing on their dispositions acquired through market socialisation.

**Key words/short phrases** abundance • consumption • disposition • ecological transition • market • power technologies • sufficiency • valuation

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In the context of the calls for sufficiency held by climate experts, consumption is a major lever of ecological transition. Numerous international reports, non-governmental organisations (NGO) advocates and media articles highlight the need for consumers to change their consumption behaviour to achieve sustainable development. For their part, governments in many countries have implemented sustainable consumption policies to guide consumers towards behaviours that reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Welch and Southerton, 2019). This centrality of consumption is also found among climate change deniers and opponents of environmentalist discourses, as they often defend a way of life (Lamb et al, 2020). This vision of consumption as the result of individual choices has been widely criticised by social science scholars who have shown

that it is far removed from the reality of consumption practices, which are rather driven by collective dynamics (Shove, 2010). Consumption practices are embedded in collective frameworks and permeate our lifestyles, not only giving rhythm to our daily lives but also structuring our social moments (Boström, 2020). Practice theory is the field of research most concerned with the analysis of the collective embeddedness of consumption practices (Warde, 2005). Research has highlighted the role played by meanings, material structures and skills in the performance of consumption practices (Shove and Pantzar, 2005). The strength of these different studies is that they opposed very behavioural and individualistic approaches to consumption and utilised a social and structural vision that is much closer to reality. Scholars have shown strong inertia in consumption practices, owing to the collective frameworks that link the temporal coordination of activities within the household (Plessz and Wahlen, 2020) to the social norms or values that guide these social practices (Sahakian et al, 2020). However, this approach provides little clarity concerning why individuals adopt certain practices, or to put it in terms used by practice theorists, why a practice recruits practitioners. In this article, I address the following questions: How did affluent consumption come to impose itself on our societies as a way of life? How have individuals been transformed into affluent and insatiable consumers? How does the affluent consumption governance regime work and what are its main lock-ins?

To answer this question, I present an agenda paper that reflects on economic sociology and Foucault's reading of power. I show the existence of government of consumption that relies on different power devices: public policy instruments, corporate economic models, managerial tools and market technologies underpinning the value regimes of consumption based on accumulation and affluence. Among the power devices, market technologies contribute to building and activating consumer dispositions for this form of consumption, shaping consumer conduct accordingly with business models, founding the norms of affluent consumption.

The first part of this article, drawing on a selection of historians' studies, shows how consumption has become central to contemporary societies, as systems of provisioning have been established to ensure the growth of states and increase profit for private entrepreneurs. This allows me to use a Foucauldian reading grid to uncover the power structures that govern consumption. The second section analyses more specifically the technologies used by public and private actors to frame the norms of consumption around its contribution to growth and well-being. Drawing on the three forms of power outlined by Foucault – sovereignty, discipline and governmentality (Foucault, 2004) – I identify power technologies that underpin mass consumption norms. Finally, in the last part of the article, I explore the precise conditions under which consumers participate in mass consumption. I show how market technologies govern consumption practices by creating and activating consumer dispositions to value the products in accordance with specific business models. In the conclusion, I return to the research agenda outlined in this article by highlighting three avenues of research that shed light on the levers and locking-in of sustainable and unsustainable consumption.

## **Bringing back the history of consumption: how consumption became central to economies**

In this first part, I show how consumption has become central to economies by drawing on a selection of historical and sociological studies that show the role of

merchants, businesses, public funding and systems of provision in the expansion of consumption. The perspective adopted here is essentially focused on Europe and North America but could usefully be expanded to other geographical areas through the work of consumer historians (see Trentmann, 2016). In this section, for the sake of simplicity, I outline the evolutions which led to the affluent consumption regime, but one could more precisely account for the change within the political economy of affluent consumption that have occurred over time.

Consumption is often addressed by social scientists from a symbolic perspective, as a manifestation of tastes and identities. However, historians have emphasised that consumption is part of a history of materiality in which goods and services are produced and circulated to find consumers (Trentmann, 2016). As Braudel's work shows, globalisation is an old phenomenon. The main commercial zones of Asia, Europe and America have been connected through the Mediterranean region since the 16th century (Braudel, 1967). The development of consumption is first and foremost inseparable from this long-distance trade that prevailed between the 16th and 19th centuries, which circulated rare goods between different cultural communities. Rather than remaining within the Baltic Sea, Dutch merchants preferred trading with China, where their goods – pepper, cloth and china – acquired higher commercial value owing to a lack of competition (de Vries and van der Woude, 1997). Communities of merchants, often organised in a diasporic manner, handled the transport of goods to areas where wealthy consumers valued them for their scarcity. For example, during the 18th century, red coral harvested in the Mediterranean and cut in Kashmir was sold to the princes of the Mongolian court. Francesca Trivellato analysed the market practices and conventions of Sephardic merchants from Livorno, who did not respond to any demand but created a profitable market for their commodities (Trivellato, 2009).

The systems of provision implemented by merchants and then traders, often with significant support from public authorities who financed transport and accepted the risks, played a major role in driving consumption. Triangular trade enabled new commodities to be produced through slavery, such as sugar, coffee, cocoa and tobacco, which were delivered to Europe and North America, creating a taste for these products. Even though no initial demand existed for these products, over time they became central components of occidental diets (Cohen et al, 2021). Colonialism expanded markets and circulated more goods, as slavery and free access to resources enabled the production of cheap goods that developed new consumers' tastes and expectations. The use of coal in the 18th century and then its large-scale use in the mid-19th century (Malm, 2016) increased labour productivity, accelerating and widening the circulation of goods, encouraged by the doctrines of political economy (Osterhammel, 2015) and the concentration of capital. Capitalism organises the economy on the ever-increasing production of large quantities of commodified goods, becoming dependent on its perpetual expansion. The market, with the help of several public policies (Polanyi, 2001), is designed as the best way to allocate wealth, replacing existing local orders based on community solidarity in which consumption needs determined production (Thompson, 1963) rather than the other way around. Massive amounts of cheap consumer goods were distributed through domestic markets, as free appropriation of natural resources in the colonies and the increase in labour productivity in the nascent capitalist regime decreased production costs. In the beginning of the 20th century, an abundance of production stimulated numerous commercial innovations (Strasser, 1989) and new knowledge and techniques of how

to stimulate affluent consumption (Cochoy, 1998). As historian Lizabeth Cohen has shown in the case of the United States (Cohen, 2003), a social contract was made between the state, business and consumer organisations to consider mass production and affluent consumption as the basic conditions by which to achieve economic development and full employment. Consumption was considered to be a civic duty, uniting the interests of citizens, workers and consumers. Affluent consumption engages individual dispositions not only to satisfy their needs or aspirations but also to express their citizenship.

Reviewing the history of consumption allows us to understand affluent consumption as the result of a large and long-term process, involving private and public actors (Chessel and Dubuisson-Quellier, 2018), of supplying goods in greater quantities and variety, with increased availability (Trentmann, 2016) to a growing number of consumers for the benefit of entrepreneurs and economies. To paraphrase the title of Frank Trentmann's book, 'how we became a world of consumers' must be understood as the result of processes whereby consumers consumed products that became increasingly mass produced to generate private profit and which consumers may have had no prior taste for or expectations of buying. This does not result from a process of manipulation of consumers but rather from an institutionalised governance of consumption, which involves the power to shape normative individual and collective conduct.

There are many definitions of power, and clarifying them is useful for understanding issues of social change (Avelino, 2021). The Foucauldian approach to power is of particular interest to understand the government of consumption conducts. From this perspective, power is an operation rather than an attribute, and represents the capacity to make another person act. The exercise of power relates to the act of conducting conduct (Foucault, 1975). This relational vision of power allows us to grasp it very specifically through the material, symbolic devices or techniques that produce reality. Foucault has identified three coexisting and combined (rather than sequential) ways of exercising power: sovereignty, discipline and governmentality (Foucault, 2004; Collier, 2009). The former tends to play a less central role in contemporary societies, to the benefit of the two latter forms, which are related to the positive and more diffuse exercise of power.

In the case of sovereignty, the power constrains and prohibits certain conduct, but also grants individual rights within the licit set of types of conduct. Sovereignty is applied to a territory and based on law but also to more symbolic actions, such as speeches, celebrations or ceremonies that create a *normativity*, understood to be a set of references for conduct. Discipline is the power exercised directly on people's bodies and is intended to increase the economic utility of individuals. It causes conduct to comply with an existing norm through mechanisms of physical constraint and surveillance that will standardise individuals, according to a training process that Foucault calls *normation*. In the case of governmentality, power is exercised over a population, that is, a huge number of individuals. Unlike disciplinary power, in the case of governmentality, the norm does not come first but emerges from the conduct of the mass. Statistical tools make it possible to identify the normal curve of the distribution of conduct and thus deviations from normality. Governmentality devices, which Foucault calls security devices, change the environment of individuals to orient their conduct while preserving their free will. For example, the market is a security device that regulates conduct through its own mechanisms without constraining it. Foucault calls this process, whereby different types of conduct progressively converge towards a more favourable one, '~~normalisation~~'.



Power is therefore exercised on individuals with the aim of linking their conduct to a norm. I suggest highlighting the different forms of power that are exerted on people, as individuals or a collective, to make their conduct comply with the norms of mass consumption. This relates to the following question: How is consumer conduct normalised to suit the objectives of mass production? Michel Foucault recognised that power devices include technologies, techniques, material forms and institutional structures. To simplify the text, I use the generic term of ‘technologies of power’. Technologies of power can be implemented not only by the state but also in other social arenas, such as firms or family. Post-Foucauldian work has built on this idea to trace technologies of power in the activities of engineers or economic actors (Miller and Rose, 2008). Some of these technologies fall under the market devices identified by economic sociology (Callon et al, 2007). Market technologies are designed and implemented by market actors (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013a), but other types of technologies can be implemented by public authorities or by consumer or social movement organisations (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013b).

In the following section, I describe technologies that normalise consumption conduct, following the Foucauldian approach of the three forms of power.

### **The role of power technologies in normalising mass consumption**

I rely on the three forms of power identified by Foucault – sovereignty, discipline and governmentality – to explore different technologies at play in the government of consumption conduct and demonstrate how they normalise mass consumption. These different technologies and their use by both public and private actors have contributed to the central value given to consumption in most economies, helping to build what can be called a political economy of affluent consumption.

#### *Sovereignty: the normativity of mass consumption as a political economic pillar*

To understand the place of consumption in our societies, it seems useful to review the technologies that have established and legitimised the consumer as a central figure and consumption as the main driver of the economy and well-being. Values of consumption are forged above all at a macroeconomic level. In macroeconomics as well as in the public policies of most countries, consumption is a primary driver of the economy, along with innovation and growth. Western economies value entrepreneurship as the foundation of economic development. Wealth indicators associate it with growth and high levels of production. Innovation, as well as cheap labour costs, increase productivity, which in turn reduces production costs. As a result, mass production has been considered the best way to secure both profits for capital owners and wealth for national economies. Affluent consumption is a consequence of this social organisation of the economy rather than a starting point.

While affluent consumption has always been criticised, even by governments on some occasions (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013c), its value is located directly in macroeconomic instruments. Among the various indicators of wealth, cost of living or standard of living are technologies that create normativity around consumption (Cook, 2020; Jany-Catrice, 2020). Based on these technologies, consumption is firmly encouraged, because access to services and goods and other equipment conditions the

well-being of both individuals and populations. High levels of consumption create standards of living, a normative point of reference, against which nations compare themselves and can exercise domination (Brand and Wissen, 2021).

Another important technology that establishes affluent consumption as a norm is the discourse on consumer sovereignty, the golden rule of the market. This notion appeared in work by English economist William Hutt (Hutt, 1936). However, it has received little theoretical attention from economic scholars. In contrast, marketing has made strong use of the idea. Historian Stefan Schwartzkopf has shown how marketers have built lines of continuity between the democratic freedom of the citizen and free and open choice of consumption, which is a market democracy (Schwartzkopf, 2018) in which consumers are the sole judges of what should be in markets (Schwartzkopf, 2011). This normative and rhetorical figure of the consumer is called upon by companies to rule out coercive regulation of their activities, and who argue that consumers must decide for themselves in the name of consumer sovereignty.

As a result, consumption and consumers appear to be the means of regulation rather than targets of consumer policies. In many countries, consumer protection policies have resulted from scandals concerning consumer safety, following accusations that producers do not keep their promises. Important regulatory measures in many countries during the 1960s contributed to making consumer information the cornerstone of business regulation. Governments implemented consumer protection policies based on two pillars, both linked to information. On the one hand, they obliged manufacturers to provide objective information on products, while on the other hand they regulated commercial discourse to rid it of any misleading information (Trumbull, 2006). Consequently, public policies reinforce the normativity of consumer sovereignty. Protection of consumers' interests relies on access to reliable and guaranteed information, while safeguarding their freedom of choice (Schleifer, 2013). The so-called 'information turn' (Frohlich, 2017) in the 1990s gave wide-open consumer choices an instrumental status in economic regulation (Everson, 2006).

This instrumental dimension also appears in taxation and consumer credit policies, introducing tension between consumption policies encouraging consumption and those intended to pursue moral goals. Product taxation policies introduce normativity into consumption, stigmatising the consumption of some products (rather than their production, it is worth noting), because of their contribution to social problems, such as tobacco, alcohol and gambling, and more recently soft drinks or polluting cars (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2016), while consumer credit policies encouraged mass consumption at the very high cost of massive indebtedness of the population (Prasad, 2012).

Affluent consumption as a social norm has been institutionalised both in public discourses and policies, for national celebrations or during recovery from troubles. This engages the population with consumption and with commercial communication, as business has made the various religious or national holidays and social rituals into celebrations that must involve consumption to associate all possible social occasions with consumption (Boström, 2020).

### *Disciplining consumption conduct to encourage a norm of abundance*

If sovereignty creates norms, discipline makes individuals adopt them to increase their economic utility. In the political economy of affluent consumption, the consumer is taught to navigate markets and to conform to consumption patterns.

For example, social reform projects rely on the biopolitical surveillance mechanisms identified by Foucault. Social surveys conducted in 19th century France, inspired by the work of Frédéric Le Play, were intended to gather knowledge on domestic budget allocation and to discipline the consumption practices of workers, censuring the less legitimate ones, such as drinking alcohol, gambling or incurring debt (Lhuissier, 2007). In the same vein, company towns in early 20th century Europe attempted to monitor workers' lifestyles, providing living spaces and offering access to carefully chosen and controlled food, clothing, social services and recreational consumption (Trentmann, 2016). Several public institutions were also dedicated to framing consumption. Food in schools, hospitals or the army has been the subject of significant control by most governments, whether to monitor consumer health or find markets for surplus food (Levine, 2008).

Disciplining consumption reveals the role of consumption as an explicit and state-sponsored project of modernisation and rationalisation. It is an activity strongly connected to specific knowledge. In the 1920s, the United States Department of Agriculture created a Bureau of Home Economics designed to modernise both agricultural production and family life (Goldstein, 2012). Home economists developed a new science of consumption to assist households, and especially women, to navigate the market. Their knowledge blends product testing techniques, nutritional expertise and cost-benefit analyses, in addition to ordinary household lay expertise. Home economists thus played an important role in public campaigns, such as conservation practices during the First World War, or reducing waste in the 1920s. However, home economics has not managed to establish itself as a legitimate science of consumption, unlike nutrition (Turner, 1982), which has become a major source of knowledge for disciplining food consumption, without avoiding the controversies inherent in science (Levenstein, 1993) or the influence of the food industry (Nestle, 2003).

Private actors have invested in the implementation of technology to discipline consumers. The notion of 'captation' introduced by Pascale Trompette reflects a process by which consumers are channelled by technical, material and commercial devices towards commercial transactions (Trompette, 2007). The term may cover all the operations intended to attract consumers and orient their trajectories in the market space, making them navigate markets in ways that are most profitable for suppliers. It includes many different techniques such as seduction, interest, recruitment, loyalty, interception and diversion (Cochoy, 2007). Captation devices include both the material arrangements (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2007) and digital equipment (Fuentes and Sörum, 2018) that attract and guide circulation of consumers in commercial spaces, training them to select goods and read packaging to optimise sale costs, as in the shift from counter sales to self-service (Cochoy, 2016). Loyalty programmes are good examples of these technologies that discipline consumption towards accumulation (Coll, 2013), by rewarding consumers more when they buy more frequently.

Competition that companies engage in through novelty, availability and variety strengthens the channelling and disciplinary attempts to which consumers are subject, maintaining high diversity in supply and expanding the market, in turn making it difficult to retain consumers permanently. As a result, disciplinary technologies in the very competitive environment of consumer markets may produce volatility in consumer choices, causing difficulties for companies.



*Governmentality: normalising consumption by markets*

The last form of power identified by Michel Foucault, which he calls governmentality, was developed during the emergence of political economy and statistics as a new set of knowledge allowing governments to pinpoint the regularities of a phenomenon within a population. Governmentality concerns a government of the masses that does not exert any constraints on individuals and relies on a very parsimonious conception of state intervention. Rather, it plays on existing mechanisms such as a market to make normalised conduct emerge.

In the context of the political economy of affluent consumption, governmentality appears to be a means of using the market to encourage behaviours that are most likely to generate profit and to sell mass-produced goods. Government of conduct is at the core of many contemporary public policies because of its strong compatibility with neoliberal political regimes and their reluctance to undertake coercive interventions. Several measures are deployed by public authorities for this purpose: advertising campaigns, economic incentives such as taxation, bonus–malus systems, self-evaluation instruments, nudges, labels and consumer information. Their objectives are not to constrain consumers but rather to encourage legitimate conduct and discourage conduct that is problematic through economic and symbolic rewards and costs (Dubuisson–Quellier, 2016). Individuals remain free to make choices. They are provided with information and incentives to help them act as good consumers and make choices that are compatible with the common good.

However, governing consumers is not exclusive to public actors. Marketing may be considered a technique of governmentality in the sense that it adjusts demand to supply, rather than the reverse, by making consumers' choices converge on supply in the interest of companies (Dubuisson–Quellier, 2010), normalising demand to align it with the objectives of suppliers.

Marketing technologies govern consumption in orienting consumers' choices towards goods that must be purchased in massive quantities. For example, charts and other ranking devices based on sales levels (Karpik, 2010) are intended to orient consumers' choices by providing them with information on others' choices, towards what appears from the market to be a norm. Consumer preferences guide other consumers by showing a normal situation in the market. Algorithms used by online shopping sites (Alemany and Vayre, 2015), which recommend products to consumers, often mention that 'other consumers who bought this product also chose these ones', and do not reveal any pre-existing consumer preference but rather orient consumer choices both to buy again or buy more and to massify demand for a limited number of supplies. The long-tail model for online sales corresponds to the sale of large volumes of a reduced number of popular items, while only low volumes of other items are sold under these techniques of governmentality. Governmentality in markets is not about revealing existing demand but about orienting and channelling demand for products that are most profitable for companies, with the help of different ~~market~~ techniques, such as algorithms, consumer information on sales rankings and targeted advertising. The market is a technology of normalisation in Foucauldian terms, because it relies on a strong power asymmetry between the supply and demand sides. Only the former has the capacity to govern the latter.

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This political economy of affluent consumption could not exist if consumers themselves did not contribute, through their practices, to its existence. It is therefore

important to understand how affluent consumption practices are forged: Why are they adopted by consumers? How do they come to consumers? In the following section, I examine how consumers come to value the goods they buy without any constraints or manipulation by highlighting how market technologies create and activate consumer dispositions.

### **Market technologies, valuation of goods and consumer dispositions**

The literature on consumption has questioned the role played by consumers. The answers vary greatly in terms of the agency granted to consumers. Some scholars have insisted that there is manipulation of consumers, creating an illusion about how goods would satisfy their desires (Baudrillard, 1996). Students from the Frankfurt School have argued for the alienation of consumers (Marcuse, 1964), and later, other scholars have argued that consumers have been put to work (Arvidsson, 2005; Zwick et al, 2008; Dujarier, 2014). Yet other scholars, in contrast, have shown a capacity to build and renew their identities (Miller, 1987; Wilk, 1999) or even to forge a culture of consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). I argue for a more distributed approach between the agency of consumers and that of collective consumption frameworks, the power devices of which I presented above. Unlike the Frankfurt School, I do not advocate an approach based on the claim that consumers are manipulated. However, neither do I consider consumer culture to be independent from the power that goods and supply exert over consumers' choices, habits, tastes and preferences. I propose to account for the way in which market technologies manage to shape consumer dispositions to value the consumption of certain products.

In the following section, I show how market technologies, as technologies of power, construct value regimes around mass consumption.

#### *Socialising consumers to mass market values: availability, variety and novelty*

Among the power technologies governing consumption, market technologies help consumers to evaluate goods. I draw from the valuation approach in economic sociology (Lamont, 2012) to understand how market technologies support the valuation of products by consumers. Valuation studies postulate that goods have no intrinsic or essential value. Rather, their value comes from complex social processes (Beckert and Aspers, 2011; Boltanski and Esquerre, 2017), involving heterogeneous collective as well as technical and contentious operations (Stark, 2009; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013a, 2013b). Market technologies, such as branding, labelling, advertising, packaging and merchandising play a central role in product valuation: they enable goods to be compared and singularised (Karpik, 2010). Following Franck Cochoy's thesis, I suggest that market technologies create and play on specific consumer dispositions (Cochoy, 2007). More specifically, market technologies make consumers value the products they consume. Long before the age of the factory, consumption developed around the 'availability, variety, and novelty' triptych (Trentmann, 2016). These are still the three main values of mass market supply, as market technologies have created strong dispositions for consumers to value these attributes. This refers to the socialisation process at stake in markets.

Through availability, consumers have been trained to access more and more goods. In the past, mail order catalogues were developed to reach out to consumers away from large urban centres. Today, chain stores and online shopping sell the same products in many large metropolises. This allows companies to expand their market and gain access to more markets and more consumers in accordance with their mass production strategy. In the meantime, availability of products is advertised through commercials and branding techniques as a strong commercial value, and it contributes to the fame of company brands and products. Consumers have learned to value the ability to find everywhere what are presented as their favourite brands. Availability or globalisation strategies are used by companies to find more consumers and markets in which to sell their produce.

Novelty is another feature of mass markets. In the past, novelty was a way to attract well-off consumers by playing on their disposition to value distinction. Then, as productivity increased to allow economies of scale, companies could increase their production and profits. However, mass-production economies were faced with the necessity of finding new markets and then reaching out to consumers who had no disposition towards or taste for novelty. For example, historians mentioned that drinking coffee required cultural dispositions in the 18th century that were acquired through frequenting specific and exclusive places in England and the United States reserved for the elites. Academics and businessmen learned to drink this beverage in moderation to show distinction in these coffee houses (Cowan, 2005). Working-class people had no taste for sugar or coffee (Bruegel, 2001). The domestic space then provided a framework for the diffusion of drinking coffee, adopted first by wives and finally by servants. In the case of sugar, working-class people struggled to develop the taste, as they did not like sweet things. Consumption of sugar was then recommended by factory managers and doctors, who lauded the virtues of this foodstuff to restore quickly the physical strength of the workers. Novelty in the past and today is a way of inducing consumers to return to a store, buy a good they already have, to accumulate or renew it. Updated versions of high-tech products, new collections of textiles, car body designs, and the entire fashion industry are devoted to disqualifying products that consumers already own to encourage them to buy new ones. Market technologies build and play on the dispositions for newness and distinction among the most affluent groups as well as on the dispositions of lower-class groups to see novelty as a way of participating in consumer society.

Finally, variety refers to the strategies developed by companies facing saturated markets to channel consumers through different versions of the same products. It is based on market technologies playing on packaging, design, branding, advertising, food recipes or product formulation. Variety is promoted to consumers as customisation, allowing them to express individual preferences. It is very compatible with mass production as it allows reliance on cross-cutting strategies to differentiate products at the very end of the production process. Market technologies have created dispositions for consumers to value highly not only choice and diversity but also the acquisition of different versions of the same products.

Variety, novelty and availability are ways of transforming mass production strategies into higher profits. Through the use of market technologies, business objectives have been turned into consumer values to make consumers buy more goods more frequently (see [Table 1](#)). As a result, the political economy of affluent consumption is firmly based on the capacity of suppliers to create and maintain the social conditions

**Table 1:** Relationships between market value, market technologies and consumer dispositions

	<b>Variety</b>	<b>Novelty</b>	<b>Availability</b>
Market technologies	Range strategies Packaging Recipes	Design Update Seasonal products	Chain stores Globalised brands Multichannel selling
Objective	Make consumers buy more	Make consumers buy again	Make consumers from everywhere buy frequently
Consumers' dispositions	Customisation	Renewal	Accessibility

of consumer dispositions to value accumulation and renewal. For this purpose, market technologies have been established by mass-production companies to encourage consumers to buy the continued flow of products arising from their business models.

In the next section, I show how market technologies can create consumer dispositions to value products generated by specific business models, allowing companies to profit.

#### *Business models, values and consumers' dispositions*

The above dispositions are not the same for different consumers. They vary according to individual social characteristics. It is therefore necessary to understand more precisely how market technologies deal with this variation in dispositions between individuals.

The notion of disposition was proposed by Pierre Bourdieu to account for the ways in which individuals act in relation to accumulated past experiences incorporated in their bodies in the form of habitus (Bourdieu, 2003). Habitus refers to patterns that are the basis of both perception and action. On this basis, individuals can recognise 'conditional and conventional stimuli' (Bourdieu, 2003: 200), allowing them to adopt strategies that they can both adapt or renew. Acquisition of dispositions occurs through socialisation processes that take place in the family and within the social group in an educational context (Bourdieu, 1984). I state here that individuals are not only exposed – to use Bourdieu's term (2003: 203) – to their social environment but also to the structures of consumption, and in particular to market environments and advertising discourses. I suggest focusing on the role of market technologies in the socialisation of individuals and in the construction of their specific dispositions as consumers. Using Bourdieu's framework on dispositions allows us to consider that individuals adjust to the market environment, not under constraint or because they would be manipulated or fooled, but because they find these practices appropriate, adaptable, satisfying and appreciable (Bourdieu, 2003). This makes it possible to understand why and how individuals become affluent consumers: as they adopt dispositions to highly value the role of affluent consumption in their material conditions of existence.

Depending on their business model, companies face a particular type of competition and price regime. To make a profit, they must implement market technologies to create dispositions for their consumers to value their goods in accordance with their business model. In this section, I explore three ideal types of consumption patterns (conspicuous consumption, enlightened consumption and constrained consumption), and identify the economic models on which they are based, in terms of volume

produced and price regime (White, 1981). I identify the market technologies used and the consumer dispositions they activate. Finally, I show that each of these consumption models can be illustrated by specific consumption patterns within the social space. Even though, individuals from the different social groups can have combinations of dispositions across the ideal types, this is also a way of highlighting the role of the market and consumption in social stratification.

The notion of conspicuous consumption was proposed by Thorstein Veblen to account for the consumption by the elite (Veblen, 1899). This model, adopted by the ultra-rich, corresponds to the consumption of goods produced in small series at high cost and sometimes tailored for each client. It is based on the sale of small volumes of products or services at very high prices: luxury cars, jewellery, exceptional wines, and stays in palaces or on yachts. Market technologies restrict access to these goods to a hand-picked clientele. Some luxury boutiques select customers at the entrance, stadiums have VIP areas and airlines have private lounges, while private clubs are only accessible to members (Cousin and Chauvin, 2021). These access restrictions maintain the social distance between consumers of these products and others. The mega-price regime (Karpik, 2010) not only reflects the high costs of raw materials or know-how but also reserves these exclusive goods for consumers with high economic capital. Consumers gain prestige through this exclusive consumption, and they help to reinforce the prestige of products and brands, as status circulates in both directions between consumers and brands, according to the principles of statutory transfers (Podolny, 1993). The competitive struggle between firms is not based on costs but on this level of prestige, which allows them to capture their customers. The companies then educate their clients so that they acquire a taste for and value the exceptional and the exclusive. For example, prestige hotels and palaces invite their clients to be very demanding about employees and services (Beaumont, 2021). Conspicuous consumption constitutes a system that is based on both an economic model of production and modes of consumption. Market technologies link the two, activating in consumers a taste for exclusivity and scarcity. If conspicuous consumption, as I defined it through this taste of exclusivity, is a strong characteristic of the mode of living of economic elites, sport, movie and show business stars, who like to show off with their jets, yachts, villas and luxury goods, it also plays an important role in the aspirational nature of consumers across classes. For example, luxury brands have been adopted by some groups from underprivileged neighbourhoods of large cities crafting of specific consumer culture. Another example is consumers from different social groups who seek to show their social ascension by adopting more conspicuous consumption tastes.

AQ3

At the other end of the spectrum, constrained consumption operates on different principles but is also based on a strong link between business models and the activation of consumer dispositions. The economic model of companies operating in these markets bases profitability on low costs. Competition between companies is essentially based on price and cost control. As with luxury products, the price is also part of the product's value. It even constitutes the main quality of the product to the point that it is presented as if stripped of other dimensions of quality to appear one-dimensional (Karpik, 2010). In low-cost supermarkets or home improvement stores, the shelves are similar to those of warehouses. Low-cost flights emphasise that no 'superfluous' services are charged to the consumer, just as fast-food restaurants require the consumers to pick up food at the counter and clear their tables. The

low-cost business model seeks economies of scale and therefore high volumes of production. To sell on a massive scale, market technologies must create value around this mass consumption, which involves a considerable number of consumers and manifests in the form of large volumes. To do this, market technologies present this consumption as an achievement that every consumer must attain in his or her life. It is valued as standard or normal consumption in the sense that it allows consumers to confirm that they are fully integrated into society. Keeping up with the Joneses is valued in this consumption. Market technologies play on dispositions to consider consumption as participation in society, as Halbwachs indicated (Baudelot and Establet, 1994). Buying high-tech goods, dining in restaurants or booking a plane trip are portrayed as attaining a standard of living in commercial discourses using formulas such as 'you too' or 'within your reach'. Market technologies also enhance the value of large-volume purchases, often imposed on consumers if they want to benefit from the lowest prices, not as constraints but rather as good deals. They play on the dispositions of consumers who are economically bound to take advantage of commercial opportunities, to be clever and watchful, and to compare purchases. It is a matter of making necessity a virtue. Consumers, when they buy in batches; during the off-season or access to higher status goods such as large screen televisions, be it at the cost of expensive credit, are portrayed as smart and cunning consumers, able to navigate the market and not miss a bargain. The economic pole of the working class is the most representative group within the social space of this type of consumption. This group corresponds to workers or employees who expect to access a certain living standard through this consumption. However, it has expanded more largely to middle-class consumers ~~for whom keeping up with the Joneses supposes to find practical solutions~~. Again, market technologies that present these consumption patterns as clever, rather than necessary, are the key connectors between business models of production and consumption practices.

AQ4

AQ5

Finally, a third type of ideal-typical consumption, enlightened consumption, can be identified through the practices of consumers from the middle classes with high educational capital. The middle class has always played a central role in consumption. As a class that is particularly receptive to reflexive dispositions (Plessz et al, 2016), middle-class people, especially the most educated ones, have demonstrated economic goodwill in different ways throughout history. For example, historians have shown their role in the establishment of a social contract around the role of consumption in the United States following the Second World War (Cohen, 2003) and in consumer activism (Glickman, 2009). Neither economically nor statutorily constrained, this group maintains a reflexive relationship with consumption, reflecting on its value in relation to its collective effects. It is therefore not surprising that market technologies are intended to enable this reflexivity (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013c), by providing consumers with delegation and judgement devices (Karpik, 2010) to guide their purchase decisions. Product tests, movie or culinary reviews (Johnston and Baumann, 2007), wine or travel guides, and organic food stores (Johnston, 2008) are among the market technologies intended to build dispositions for enlightened consumption. Consumers are encouraged to consider the multiple dimensions of goods and the plurality of value regimes in markets and to delegate their choices to many different expert prescriptions such as guides, critics and consumer reviews. Therefore, educated middle-class consumers are quick to consider different issues. Market technologies play on their dispositions to adopt what I call 'economic goodwill', namely a way

**Table 2:** Organisation of three ideal-typical consumption models

	<b>Conspicuous consumption</b>	<b>Enlightened consumption</b>	<b>Constrained consumption</b>
Business model	Small series, custom made	Differentiation	Low cost
Mode of competition	Exceptions	Singularities	Price
Price regime	Mega	Premium	Affordability
Market technologies	Restricted access	Prescription	Accessibility
Consumer disposition	Taste for prestige	Taste for reflexivity	Taste for bargains and participation in society
Location in the social space of the most representative groups	Economic elites, ultra-rich	Educated upper-middle classes	Economic pole of the working classes

of consuming appropriately in accordance with the common good. Historians have reported how such people were engaged during war periods in saving energy or scarce resources, or in monitoring price increases (Cohen, 2003; Glickman, 2009). More recently, they have been targeted by public campaigns, commercial strategies and mobile applications to incorporate environmental, nutritional or social justice concerns in their consumption choices. Some market technologies have contributed to creating an eco-habitus for consumers with high cultural capital (Carfagna et al, 2014) that engenders a taste for ethical or responsible consumption as a strategy of distinction (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013c). Reflexive consumption can lead some consumers to distance themselves significantly from material consumption. However, even though reflexive consumption is a defining feature of social movement and has mostly targeted educated upper-middle-class consumers, it has today largely spread outside this narrow group, as responsible consumption has developed more largely across classes. However, this consumption may also engage individuals in an extensive repertoire of consumption in which ethical consumption is combined with other less reflexive consumption practices. The reason is that so many social activities are entangled with consumption that it may be difficult for any individual to escape the nexus of consumption norms and not engage in affluent consumption (Boström, 2020). Even if they seem to have an increased awareness of collective concerns about consumption, responsible consumers have also acquired strong dispositions to engage in mass consumption.

I present the different ideal types of consumption and how market technologies reflect economic models and consumer dispositions in [Table 2](#).

## Conclusion

In the context of the climate crisis, many voices are questioning the responsibility for consumption, calling for profound changes in our lifestyles. Following numerous works in social sciences, I recall in this article that it may be unrealistic to consider that ecological transition can rest on the shoulders of consumers alone. I highlighted the strong interdependencies within a political economy of affluent consumption, between public policies, corporate economic models and consumer practices. The main lock-ins under this regime of affluent production and consumption originate from these interdependencies and strongly constrain the trajectories of transition.

Understanding these interdependencies will allow us to identify the levers of change and some path towards sufficiency.

Affluent consumption economies, which are highly resource intensive, cannot be the result of consumer choices alone. Affluent consumption is extensively organised and governed because of its structural role in both development models of states and business models of companies. Affluent consumption has been forged as a norm that is activated, legitimised and institutionalised by public discourses and policies, corporate strategies, the media and public opinion. However, it cannot be imposed on individuals by force. The governance of consumption is based on technologies of power that orient individual conduct, leading people to adopt the norms of affluent consumption by activating and shaping consumers' dispositions, which are specific to their social groups and acquired through market socialisation. The governance of consumption has changed significantly over time, as the configuration of technologies of power, business models and dispositions have concomitantly evolved. For example, an increasing number of consumers have been exposed to new forms of market socialisation and have had access to affluent consumption, while the largest part of the world's population has not. The aspirational models for consumption have changed as some goods and services have become more affordable, reflexive consumption has become far more widespread in recent years and includes many more aspects. This historical process needs to be assessed through a political economical lens able to account for what could be called 'consumption governance regimes', corresponding to the various configurations of market technologies, business models and consumer dispositions occurring over time. We need to assess the conditions of these configurational changes in consumption governance regimes: how the affluent consumption regime has emerged, how it is maintained and where are its strongest lock-ins. It is of particular importance in the context where sufficiency is called upon by activists, climate experts and governments as a way of tackling the climate crisis. Obviously, sufficiency cannot arise without the development of a new consumption governance regime able to place sufficiency rather than affluence at the core of the process of social and economic value creation. While the social sciences have been overlooked in funding for climate change and ecological transition research (Overland and Sovacool, 2020), the systemic vision they provide, and their capacity to demonstrate the links between business models of production, macroeconomic public policies and consumer practices, appear to be essential for understanding the structural and institutional lock-ins and levers of ecological transition.

A research agenda for the structural conditions of lifestyles can be proposed from this approach to the governance of consumption. Much work exists on the institutionalisation of mass consumption, but this could be considerably enriched by an analysis of the role of public policy instruments and discourses in the institutionalisation of affluent consumption. The aim is to understand how consumption is encouraged or discouraged by public policies in areas such as credit or consumer protection, or in broader policy areas such as housing, planning, economics and industry. What are the instruments of legitimisation or de-legitimisation of consumption? How is consumption linked to development and well-being objectives? For example, what is the role of home ownership policies or policies to replace polluting vehicles in maintaining dependence on cars? What is measured, and what is its value? What are the main indicators (such as purchasing power, GDP, growth rate, standard of living or poverty line), instruments (for example, economic forecasts) and assumptions



about expected or necessary levels of consumption or standards of living (for example, square metres of housing, equipment or access to leisure)?

A second line of research concerns the business models of companies and their structural properties. How have they been historically elaborated, and what are their ideological foundations? Who in organisations uses them and how, and what are their effects on economic decisions? What expertise has been developed in the spheres of finance, business, think-tanks and research? How is this knowledge taught and circulated? What is measured, and what is it worth? How are notions of performance or efficiency defined, and who challenges these definitions? How are new entities and measures introduced, and where are the controversies? Of course, it is necessary to link these instruments of economic decision-making in business to their effects on production, in terms of resource use, cost calculations and expected demand.

Finally, the third path I propose concerns the conditions of value creation, or what we call the processes of valuation of products or lifestyles. This is a decisive element in the governance of consumption, which clearly structures forms and levels of consumption to create and activate the dispositions of individuals to desire a particular lifestyle. Of course, market technologies such as marketing and advertising play a central role in these valuation processes. However, they are not the only factors. The media, popular culture, public discourse, public policies, collective mobilisations and professional discourses also contribute greatly to the making or unmaking of value regimes around forms of consumption or lifestyles. We can interrogate these valuation processes to understand the actors involved and the role of power mechanisms. The controversies around these value regimes are privileged points of entry for understanding the locking and unlocking around the norms and organisation of affluent consumption (Fuchs et al, 2021). Some collective action repertoires developed by activists are particularly intended to weaken existing value regimes (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2020) and construct new ones (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013b). These value regimes vary greatly according to historical and geographical context and can operate between countries according to patterns of domination.

This research agenda calls for studies with a broad vision of consumption which includes, in addition to the assessment of consumer practices, the roles of business models, market technologies, public policies and social movements. Such research would also help inform reflections on the structural conditions for ecological transition.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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