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## P63 - Understanding Hybrid Publics

### Energy saving policies: a study of public's discursive practices

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**Abstract** : The communication will seek to explain what, between 2009 and 2013, might appear to be a downturn in statements condemning excessive energy consumption.

With the presentation of an original survey device and an initial sociolinguistic description to identify discursive practices relating to energy savings, this paper explores an alternative hypothesis to that of social norm disaffection. This hypothesis is that respondents' testing of the conditions of the actual exercise of the social norm leads to legitimate reasons for postponing or adjusting its application.

**Keywords (5 to 8)**: Public Opinion; Energy Saving; Discursive Practice; Open-Ended Question; stigmatization ; Denunciation ; Discernment

### Introduction

The Grenelle environment forum was intended to be a decisive turning point in public environmental policy. Whilst this device gave rise to mitigated evaluations (Boy et al.; 2012), in France it marked a return to the agenda of energy policies and of the question of energy saving in a different context. It defined energy saving as a solution (Zittoun; 2013) to climate change problems and to the depletion of fossil fuels. Making use of the information and incentive tools available in both the public space and in the marketplace, it devotes considerable space to the “consumer citizen”, on the one hand discussing energy choices through the theme of ecological democracy, and on the other hand opting for “sustainable consumption” in line with economic and environmental considerations. A high level of public awareness of these issues is vital to such policies. The dissemination of statements articulating values, social norms and actions which favour energy-saving practices is indeed part of a new statement regime (Foucault, 1969): it legitimises these public policies whilst at the same time driving discursive practices aimed at encouraging energy sufficiency.

This paper will attempt to explain some of the sociolinguistic modalities of these discursive practices in relation to the reception, transformation and repeated use of statements concerning the public energy-saving “solution”.

It starts by presenting a survey device and a situational analysis which allow us, from a sociolinguistic standpoint, to characterise public statements relating to energy saving. In particular, albeit without going into details<sup>1</sup>, it points out a distinction between public statements of *stigmatisation*, aimed at criticising any deviation from the norm (in this case, energy saving), and statements of *denunciation* (Boltanski, 1984), justifying or challenging the values and/or modalities of public energy-saving policies.

It then moves on to take account of what might appear between 2009 and 2013 to have been a “normative loosening”. By this we mean the fact that when people are

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<sup>1</sup> This distinction is presented and discussed in Brugidou, 2013.

asked open questions, they seem to be less critical of excessive energy consumption. We believe that it is the interviewees' examination of the actual conditions under which the norm operates which leads them to postpone or adapt its application for reasons that they believe to be legitimate. Two arguments can be used to back this assertion:

- an empirical argument based on the analysis of textual data. The analysis shows that statements focus (more strongly in 2009 than in 2013) on the energy-saving issue. Interviewees talk less about the principle behind the norm than about the concrete conditions for its application and the difficulties that these might create. Whilst the interviewees are less critical of deviations and still tend to somewhat politicise energy-saving issues, they nevertheless talk about them more often and in greater detail;
- a theoretical argument from “the new casuistry”, relating to moral sociology. According to A. Jonsen and S. Toulmin, “the [casuist] purpose is not to develop or apply principles in order to make decisions [on questions relating to social justice]: they simply propose to construct an acceptable solution for a particular problem” (Jonsen and S Toulmin, 1988<sup>2</sup>. Contrary to the Pascalian argument which criticises casuistry for its intentional approach and ultimately for its laxness – pure intention exempting one from the harmful effects of an action – the new casuistry makes the examination of an action’s multiple circumstances – and not conscience – the condition for updating or even evolving a norm.

From this point of view, the observed “normative loosening” should be interpreted not as backward step, but as a form of deeper collective development, a “descent into generality” (Rosanvallon, 2008), through the all-out exploration of the consequences of energy-saving policies by the publics who are targeted.

This hypothesis allows us to uncover a third type of public statement which is similar to the exercise of *discernment* and to casuistry, because it is a case of examining the circumstances of an action, before giving an opinion.

### ***The empirical survey: a “normative loosening”?***

The idea behind the longitudinal survey device is a relatively simple one: it consists in assessing the strength of a norm and the extent of its dissemination, using analysis of the reprobation that deviations from the rule arouse in the public. P. Pharo points out that Durkheim had already offered to find an “agent which in some way forces moral rules to outwardly translate their specific nature, and the agent envisaged consists in looking for what happens when these various rules are broken” (P. Pharo, 2004; p. 165).

The survey is mainly based on an experimental protocol which leaves a great deal of room for open-ended questions. One of its particularities is that it introduces a diachronic dimension to the gathering and analysis of open-ended questions. This

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<sup>2</sup> Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988, quoted in Goffi, 2001 ; p106.

temporal dimension is a response to both a conception of the publics formed by controversy (Brugidou, 2008) and to the more specific issue of normative dissemination relating to a public policy – in this case energy saving (Pautard, 2009; Brugidou & Garabuau-Moussaoui, 2013).

The survey was carried out in two waves (2009 and 2013) and examines perceptions of energy issues and energy-saving practices in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region<sup>3</sup> (PACA). It asked an open question designed to learn the interviewees' reasons (good or bad) for not saving energy:

In your opinion, why do some people think that it is not important to save energy?  
(Open-ended question)

The formulations and number of follow-ups for this question were coded. The replies were recorded and transcribed in full. Previous studies have shown the importance of follow-up instructions and the dialogic nature of open questions<sup>4</sup>.

By analysing responses using a method which hybridised the analysis of textual data<sup>5</sup> and the analysis of discourse (Brugidou and Moine, 2010), we were able to distinguish four types of statement:

- *stigmatisation* statements which criticise people who do not save energy,
- *denunciation* statements which question the principles behind the energy-saving norm or the introduction of public action measures,
- *discernment* statements examining the circumstances of the action and suspending any judgement which will criticise a behaviour or condemn a policy,
- “residual” statements or “zero” statements which do not fall into any of the above categories.

We then recoded responses to the open question in order to construct the following variable:

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<sup>3</sup> First wave in April 2009 by Institut LH2. Sample comprising 2,100 persons aged 18 and over, living in the PACA region (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur). The three sub-samples were built using the random method. Telephone study, end of April 2009.

Second wave in 2013 by Institut Somme Toute. Sample comprising 1,500 persons aged 18 and over, living in the PACA region. Quota method. Telephone study.

<sup>4</sup> A more detailed presentation of the device may be found in Brugidou and Moine, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Alceste software. Reinert (1993).

Year of study	2009	2013	TOTAL
<b>Types of statement</b>			
Stigmatisation	53.4%	42.3%	<b>48.2%</b>
Zero statement	33.3%	38.7%	<b>35.8%</b>
Denunciation	6.7%	7.0%	<b>6.8%</b>
Discernment	6.7%	12.0%	<b>9.1%</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 1: evolution in statement types between 2009 and 2013<sup>6</sup>.**

Analysis of the evolution in responses to reasons for not saving energy thus highlighted what we might qualify as “normative loosening”: in 2013, significantly fewer PACA inhabitants (ten points less than in 2009) criticised the fact of not saving energy. Equally, the proportion of respondents politicising (in their discourse) energy-saving issues – by challenging implemented public actions – remained stable (around 6%). It was therefore statements which neutralise the normative charge (absence of *stigmatisation*) without explicitly condemning the unjust nature of this type of solution which significantly increased (Brugidou and Moine, 2010).

In these responses, we can see that the political and economic context is one of the keys to explaining these evolutions.

Furthermore, this can also be seen in the evolution in responses to the survey’s closed questions.

Questions	2009	2013	Difference
Unemployment: now a priority for France	52%	64%	+ 12 points
Environment: now a priority for France	14%	5%	- 9 points
It is very important to save energy	65%	56%	- 9 points
Main reason for saving energy: for financial reasons	12%	21%	+ 9 points
When I save energy, it’s a drop in the ocean: totally disagree	32%	16%	- 16 points

**Table 2: evolution in context between 2009 and 2013 (closed questions).**

### ***Showing discernment***

Detailed analysis of the evolution in responses between 2009 and 2013 shows that there are fewer stigmatisation statements without there being any clear increase in the number of denunciation statements. Furthermore, it would appear that statements which do not fall into these two categories or into their intermediate forms cannot be simply qualified as *exit* forms in the sense used by Hirschman (1970) : the interviewees do not disengage from the question in hand in order to retreat into the private domain,<sup>2</sup> but some of them, at least, would appear to be engaged in a

<sup>6</sup> Dependency is very significant:  $\chi^2 = 30.26$ ,  $ddl = 3$ ,  $1-p = >99.99\%$ .

different type of *public* activity in relation to our question. In particular, they examine the circumstances of the action before coming to an opinion. These circumstances are often deemed to be attenuating, because they complicate energy-saving actions, or else purely and simply justify letting those concerned off the hook, in as much as the energy-saving actions would be rendered impossible.

Analysis of the evolution in vocabulary<sup>7</sup> between the two waves of the survey shows that there is a decrease in the number of words belonging to the lexical fields of *selfishness*, *future*, *information* and *habit*. Conversely, we find a strong increase in vocabulary relating to energy (electricity, gas), consumption, energy uses (cold/heat, lighting), cost (bill, pay, spend, euros, EDF, etc.).

In 2013, the interviewees did not therefore disengage from energy saving; they looked at it differently by focusing on how energy is used and how much these uses cost. The responses were both longer than in 2009 and concentrated more on the energy-saving solution and on possible problems relating to its application.

As illustrated by a certain number of representative examples, the period which separates our two studies was particularly marked by the implementation of measures discussed at the Grenelle forum. During this period, measures sometimes seen as being too generous or poorly monitored were reassessed less positively or had their modes of application changed, not without public controversy: photovoltaic electricity feed-in tariff, tax relief for renovation and “ecological bonus/penalty” system for cars. The ADEME policy moved away from “eco-gesture” awareness campaigns (such as the national “let’s get moving, things are hotting up” campaign in 2007) and focused more on measures to encourage renovation. The increase in this type of measure following the Grenelle forum went more or less hand-in-hand with a drop in the number of environmental issues on the public opinion agenda, as measured by surveys.

Photovoltaic production of electricity (diffuse)	Buildings	Brown and white goods	Lighting
- Feed-in tariff <sup>8</sup>	- New buildings: RT2012 Generalisation of low-energy buildings in 2013.  - Old buildings: Energy-renovation plan.	New energy label, end 2011.	Generalisation of withdrawal of filament lamps, end 2011.

**Table 3: Some measures implemented between 2009 and 2013.**

<sup>7</sup> Lexical fields built on the basis of identification of specific words (statistically overused) per year. Specificity greater than 1.2, frequency greater than 15.

<sup>8</sup> In 2008, EDF received 18,000 requests for photovoltaic feed-in contracts. In 2009 this number reached 80,000.

In line with casuistic discourse and following its two-part question/response format (the first exposition of the “case” being in the question that is asked), these statements explore plausibility, i.e. what is “humanly achievable” (Gritti, 1968; p.104).

*Well, because it's not their priority right now. Right now there are ..., there are ..., day-to-day priorities which are far more important [...] Like, um, having food, somewhere to live ... Making ends meet ... Rather than thinking about saving energy ... (Man, university graduate, executive).*

When they are elaborated upon, the responses give further details on the “questions of conscience” under consideration:

- One's attention turns to things other than saving energy – children, work.

*Because I think that people have other concerns at the moment. They are thinking about their jobs, they are thinking about their children who are out of work, and saving energy becomes – it is secondary. But everyone is careful. (Woman, no qualifications, inactive, 55-64 years old).*

- Certain circumstances – young people who are particularly affected by unemployment, the spectacle of fortunes which are felt to be underserved – explain the low priority given to energy-saving.

*They don't give a damn and they don't want to make an effort! [...] Oh, I see that especially in young people who are twenty years old or so, they don't give a damn because they are desperate, despite their qualifications, hell, there's just no work, and that's not going to change over the weeks to come, so I sense a real feeling of despair among young people and I'm well-placed to know that, the kids in my class are 9 years old, their parents are having to deal with huge financial problems which continue to get worse, my own children are no longer teenagers, they're looking for work and it's really tough! So they have to put up with low-paid jobs, that's the way it is, there are people with huge fortunes - out of the richest people in France, there are a dozen or so who control the entire market, and that's that, they are not prepared to make an effort! (Woman, university graduate, intermediate profession, 55-64 years old.)*

### *Showing discernment: taking into account the limits of public policies*

It would also seem that interviewees pay greater attention to modalities relating to public energy-saving policies. They are particularly interested in the cost of the investment required to save energy. *Um, what can I say, um, yeah, some people don't pay attention. I mean, some people don't really care. I mean it can become expensive. Everything to do with, um, what's it called, solar panels are expensive. That's all. (Woman, secondary education, 18-34 years old.)*

Everything seems as if in 2013 the interviewees took greater account of the practical modalities of saving<sup>9</sup> than of the principles they had talked about in 2009. It is the specific circumstances relating to public measures – some of which were introduced during this period – which explains the relatively high level of indulgence of those we spoke to.

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<sup>9</sup> Analysis of words overused per study wave shows that in 2009 interviewees were more concerned about sorting waste and saving water than about saving energy.

*Well, I think there are people who think a little bit the same as me, regarding the cost, because you know, it's very expensive, so given the time it takes to break even, it's too late for us. When they tell us about solar water heaters, or whatever, something else, it's so expensive that at our age it takes far too long to break even, it's too expensive, too long, too many problems! I've got friends who did it, got solar water heaters, after 10 years you have to change them, it costs 3 or 4 times as much as a normal water heater. To break even when you have to change it every 10 years, breaking even is very expensive. For the time being, there's nothing reliable in the future. (Man, no qualifications, retired, 55-64 years old.)*

*Well, I'll tell you, in our situation, we live in social housing, we don't, we can't control consumption. But if you wanted to try to save energy, you'd need to protect the walls better. So in some ways we're not directly responsible. [Okay. What do you mean? What else?] Well, if I lived in a detached house and I can save energy by putting special products on the facades, or on the roof, so that some kind of saving could be made, then yes. But then, my consumption it is what it is, and ... I can't control the situation here where I am. It's the local authority that does that for me. (Man, secondary education, retired, 55-64 years old.)*

These examples illustrate what are sometimes sophisticated combinations of circumstances, reasons or even authorities: the cost of a solar water heater and the time it takes to break even, combined with an advanced age make certain measures impractical. Circumstances can be more or less restrictive; some relate to the economic climate, which might change; others relate to policies which may or may not last and over which one has no control, or to infrastructures which are designed to endure: for example, whether one is a tenant or an owner will have a decisive effect on the situation, as will living in a flat or a detached house. These circumstances affect the extent to which we can control a situation, and our level of responsibility therefore changes.

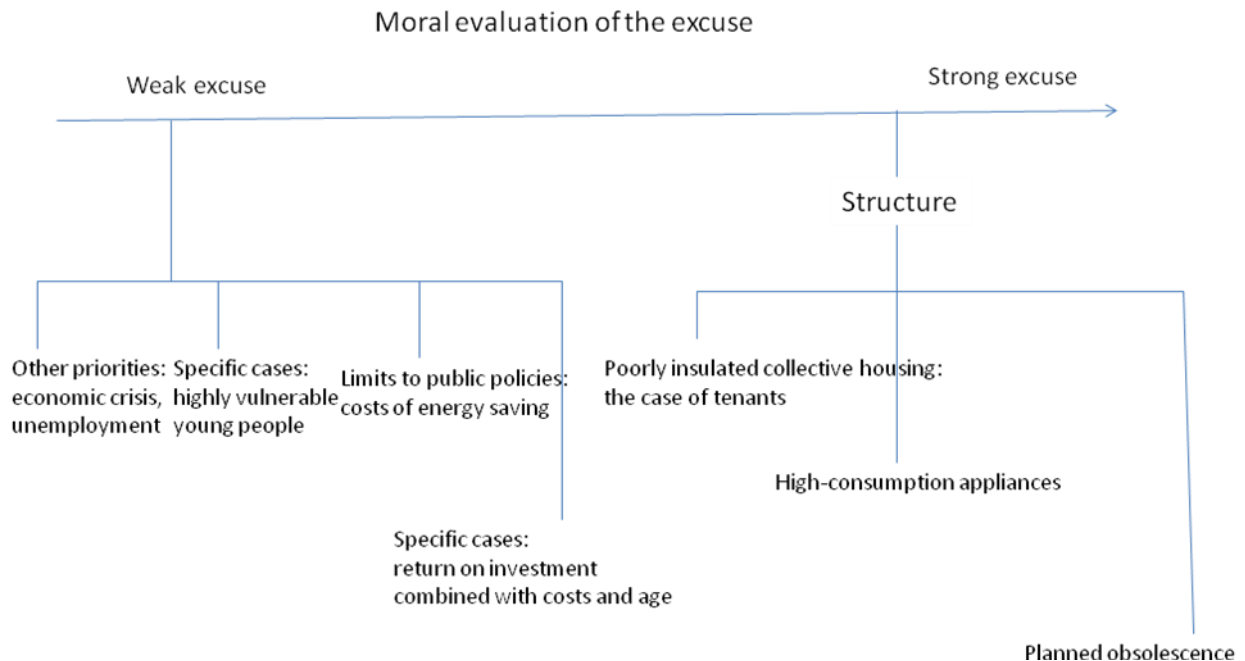
Here we see the characteristic of casuistic reasoning; after posing a moral dilemma by establishing a case, and then weighing the circumstances, the constraints of the action and the principle, it calls upon "authorities" to interpret the rule and assess the strength of any excuse. It finally comes up with an opinion - which by its very nature is only probable – on the degree of guilt or innocence of a hypothetical accused. Curiously enough, the artificial situation of using a sample survey to question people once again draws us closer to a casuistic form of reasoning: in fact the case under consideration is always partly hypothetical and partly "real". As Jules Gritti points out, in casuistry the distinction between possible cases and real cases is not pertinent; the casuist "sometimes draws on his/her experience as a confessor (...) and sometimes from previous corpuses of casuistry (...). The problem does not lie in the more or less extensive realism of the approach, but in the "form" (scholars would say in "the formal object") which presides over the sampling and distribution of the distributive elements of the question of conscience" (Gritti, 1968; p.105). It is therefore the question of casuistic reasoning's "conditions of bliss" – to put it in more modern vocabulary – linked to its grammar, that we must consider. A sample survey using an open-ended question allows us to gather cases in the manner of the casuistry manuals used by confessors (sometimes several thousand in number<sup>10</sup>)

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<sup>10</sup> For example, P. Milhard, *La vraie guide des curez, vicaires et confesseurs*, Lyon, 1604, in 8° ou *l'inventaire des cas de conscience contenu es deux tome de nostre guide et au manuel*



devoted to the “conduct of conducts” (Foucault, 1994, p. 237). Given its overarching situation, the sample survey (heir to techniques of subjectification) solicits summary forms of examination of conscience, creates series of cases, causes variation in situations and circumstances, maps out what is “humanly achievable” and thus reveals the lineaments of a scale on which to morally assess actions and the strength of excuses.



**Graph 1: grading of “questions of conscience” relating to energy saving** (non-exhaustive, based on cited examples)

### ***The U-turn: from examining circumstances to examining intention***

If we now consider not the (moral) assessment of the acts but instead the assessment of public action, the role of this casuistry is closer to what Pierre Rosanvallon calls a “loss of generality” – as opposed to the rise in generality which often characterises “the formulation and politicisation of social cleavages” studied by political sociology (Leca, 2009). It involves looking every which way at the diversity or the “totality of existing situations” (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 464) and assessing the modalities for the application of public action, by comparing them with the heterogeneity of situations <sup>11</sup>. So here, casuistic reasoning serves to explore the applicability of a rule. However, it is still located in the *public* sphere, though alongside *policies* rather than *politics*. *Oh, so how can we save energy when we’re being encouraged to buy more and more appliances that gobble up energy? And for*

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*du divin service avec force cas nouveaux pour la pratique des sacrements*, Toulouse, 1611, in 12° quoted by Gay, 2005, p. 178, note 25.

<sup>11</sup> This is the difference which separates the various phases of the Grenelle environment forum, loss of generality being characteristic of COMOPs (operational committees) which are no longer interested in the discovery of public measures and their prioritisation, preferring to explore the conditions of their application. Brugidou, 2012, p.180 and following.

*example, how can you not use energy when you're looking for a job that requires you to have a car? Whatever happens you're going to pollute, and there aren't many vehicles available which pollute less or don't pollute at all, I mean nothing's being developed like that. (Man, university graduate, intermediate profession, 18-34 years old.)*

### *Showing discernment: taking account of structures*

This is why some of the responses seem to apply less to attenuating the agent's mistake, and thus to reducing *stigmatisation*, than to condemning the limits of public actions or even condemning an unfair (consumer) society which encourages us to consume whilst at the same time criticising us for consuming too much. Like Stigmatisation and Denunciation, Discernment<sup>12</sup> and Denunciation are also reversible because they presuppose one another, with the rise in generality leading to loss of generality. Yet this operation often causes a re-politicisation of the problem through discussions brought about by the modalities of the solution.

*[...] for example, people who can't afford to buy a refrigerator which uses, um, less ... less energy ... They are, um, they are of course a little bit more expensive, I mean, anything to do with um, using less electricity, is always a bit more expensive, but people who can't afford it, well, of course, maybe they won't buy something which is in fact more energy-efficient. [...] At the end of the day, it's to do with a certain class, because people who are able to buy products like that, [...] in fact it's the government which forces us to do that, it's the consumer society in fact, isn't it? [What do you mean?] Well, I mean now, you've bought it, and in fact everything is calculated so that the appliance will stop working after two years, for example, and then whatever happens you have to replace it [...] I think that in fact we're just tools of society and in fact, despite that, you really have to stick at it in in order to, um ... in order to try, by ourselves, to do something about energy consumption. (Woman, university graduate, employee, 18-34 years old.)*

However, we should not be surprised by the circulation between declaratory positions of discernment and denunciation; this is exactly what Pascal was the first to do – and, it has to be said, at the cost of an extremely violent reversal - when he condemned casuistic *laxness*: he believed that the endless examination of the circumstances of an action leads to its opposite, i.e. to an examination of the purity of the intention. There is thus a shift from an external focus on the circumstances of an action, to a focus on the agent and his/her intentionality. The polemic force of the *Provinciales* lies in the absurdity of the conclusion: murder is allowed if the intention is pure.

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<sup>12</sup> By its very nature, discernment is coupled with stigmatisation and graduates its effects.

## Conclusion

Analysis of these responses pertaining to energy-saving allowed us to reveal a series of three declaratory positions relating to acts of language.

Each of these declaratory statuses is analytically defined in comparison to the others: their narrative grammars (Brugidou, 2013) present the same structure, even though the agents are different.

Type of act of language	Agent	Event	Value object
Stigmatisation	Police force	Punish a deviation	Maintain a tradition-based community
Denunciation	Crusading reformer	Condemn an injustice	Build a community
Discernment	Judge	Examine the circumstances / modalities of the public action	Apply a solution to a public problem

**Table 2: Grammars of stigmatisation, denunciation and discernment**

Empirical analysis demonstrated the existence of intermediate hybrid statements with traits that related to heterogeneous positions: for example, the specification through casuistic reasoning of category-based limits to public action measures which might lead to denunciation of their ineffectiveness or unfairness. This analysis therefore showed that over and above the analytical description of these grammars, it is the circulation between these declaratory positions which constitutes a research issue. The politicisation or depoliticisation of statements relating to energy-saving can be grasped through various different modalities due to the reversible nature of the declaratory positions revealed.

This survey also reminds us that by their very nature, stigmatisation and denunciation are linked to forms of discernment which graduate and avert their violence: the reflexive examination of situations and cases also leads to balanced opinions which are nevertheless not without emotion.

Finally, this survey hints at the utility of articulating an approach through political sociology and through public policies – or to put it another way, between a public and a public policy solution (Bouillet, 2015). Philippe Zittoun's works have shown the fruitfulness of pragmatist and discursive approaches to public policies. We believe it would be useful to pursue this approach by following these statements through to the publics they are helping to form. It is this articulation which allows us to understand that the appropriation of a public policy also involves going through phases of partial rejection and of reformulations. In particular, we feel that empirical observation showing what appears to be a normative decline in relation to energy-saving might be better understood as a form of enhancement due to the public exploring the conditions under which these measures are applied.

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