

Double Standards and Simulation: Symbolism, Rhetoric and Irony in Eco-Politics

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Framed rationales and euphemistic behaviours in every-day consumption

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Françoise BARTIAUX
Senior Scientist (FNRS)
Institute of Demography
University of Louvain
Place Montesquieu, 1/17
B-1348-Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium
E-mail: bartiaux@demo.ucl.ac.be

Abstract

This paper points out and discusses several social factors that contribute to making eco-politics rather inefficient. This analysis is based on two empirical researches done on Belgian households over the last eight years; these surveys show that “private routines and rationales represent working responses to collective concerns and societal anxieties” (Shove, 2003:90).

In one of these surveys, the majority of respondents indicated that they have not done much regarding energy savings in their dwelling because it is not a priority for them.

The same respondents are also well informed about climate change and aware of their energy consumption: this shows that information and awareness are no longer bringing about changes in practices, as implied by the long-prevailing model of rational action. This pattern, however, matches well with the “world socialisation scheme” of most western societies based on resources predation, made acceptable by a strong division between nature and humanity (Descola, 1998).

This division, which is also mental, appears to be diffracted into numerous rationales that underlie specific practices, which thus seem to be uncoordinated with respect to their environmental consequences (for example, in interviews, grocery shopping is unanimously disconnected from household-waste production).

This rationale’s fragmentation may also be associated with the growing social valorisation of subjectivity, which deepens the active ignorance of nature and environment issues in at least three ways. Firstly, it prevents the production of a sense of solidarity (Martucelli, 2002) between generations or between species. Secondly, the valorisation of subjectivity encourages eclecticism, by which some environmentally friendlier practices happen to be picked for the “self-esteem bonuses” (Moezzi, 2000) they are carrying (for example, buying an A+ appliance but using it more often). Finally, this metonymical behaviour enables one to remove the perspective of a narcissistic wound due to the impossibility of controlling the courses of events and of nature, a growing concern in Europe, as shown by several opinion surveys.

Introduction

Focusing on lay people and every-day consumption enables us to point out and discuss several social factors that contribute in making eco-politics rather inefficient. This discussion is one of the objectives of this paper. The perspective that is adopted here is close to cultural anthropology as it is postulated that social representations and daily practices have “implicit meanings” (Douglas, 1999) and do speak, among other topics, about how nature and environment issues are problematised by ordinary citizens in Belgium. Of course, these problematisations are rooted both in the Belgian political context and in wider social and cultural influences summarised as a search for “comfort, cleanliness and convenience” by E. Shove (2003). The Belgian political context is characterised by a regional delegation of several environmental matters, among which residential energy consumption and household waste management, the main topics of interest in this paper.

The main objective here is to shed light on some practical, mental or social mechanisms that enable what I shall call an active ignorance of nature and environmental issues from the general public; this active ignorance is performed to a variable extent by most Belgian consumers and also contributes to making eco-politics rather inefficient by allowing business, consumption and eco-politics to continue (nearly) as usual.

I will try to show that the openness to environmental information is dependent of the possibility for the consumer to hear it and that this variable – active ignorance – may be seen as a societal self-defence mechanism for avoiding a societal self-deception that would occur if this world socialisation scheme were to be abandoned, as well as other societal values seen as quite important in our societies.

This analysis is based on two empirical researches done on Belgian households over the last eight years; two ‘data’ sets are especially used in this paper: a recent phone survey on energy-related practices and representations that was realised in September 2004 on a national representative sample (n=1000) and a set of ten in-depth interviews of householders who volunteered for receiving, for free, a full energy assessment of their dwelling. They thus constitute a selected sample of persons quite interested in energy-savings. They were interviewed two or three months after this assessment, during the winter 2004-2005. Both ‘data’ sets were produced in the framework of the SEREC project¹ and their analysis is primarily inductive. Rhetoric figures provide some tools for analysing the interviews and so does the self-presentation and the justifications made by the interviewees, following, in doing that, the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (1991). As it will be developed in the paper, these surveys show that “private routines and rationales represent working responses to collective concerns and societal anxieties” (Shove, 2003:90). These surveys also reveal the working responses of their authors (my collaborators and myself in both cases!) in order to study environmental issues, just as with any other observation method. So, this paper includes some methodological notes to reflect the fact that any finding always depends on the way it has been produced. Irony is thus primarily here a methodological tool.

¹ SEREC: Socio-technical factors influencing Residential Energy Consumption, a research project coordinated by myself and financed by the Belgian Science Policy Office. In order to try to disentangle the Belgian and the wider effects on ordinary consumption, a comparative dimension with Denmark is included in the research project whose first results for Belgium are presented in this paper.

1. “Awareness is not enough”: the behavioural and mental fracture between nature and humanity

a. Perceptions on climate change, risk and environment

In 1998, half of the Belgians knew that in twenty years, Earth’s climate would be warmer.² In 2004, 84% of the respondents gave the same answer to the same question.³ It may be hypothesised that the 2003 heat wave and the numerous interventions in the media on this topic have increased the Belgian public’s awareness on climate change.

Furthermore, at the end of this 2004 survey, the respondents had to agree or not with the following statements, in the following order:

- “to worry for the environment is urgent otherwise, one risks to head towards a catastrophe”
- “to worry for the environment is a fashionable phenomenon”
- “to worry for the environment is something that one has to begin to take into account”

A strong majority agreed with the first and the third statement and disagreed with the second one⁴.

These results already show that a collective concern for the environment and an anxiety for a perceived risk seem to be widely shared in Belgium. Nevertheless, these results should be qualified by taking into account the context in which they were produced: it includes a concern for showing a consistent face (Goffman, 1973 and 1974) during the interview, even on a phone survey. Several quotes from qualitative in-depth interviews also echo this anxiety however:

- “I know that (climate change) is confirmed (...) It is now that we can act up” (Alain, agronomist, around 40 years old, 3 children)
- To the question “when you hear “energy consumption”, to what do you directly think?” the answer is “To CO₂, (...) to the environment in its totality. To the fact that apparently, there are high risks in maintaining a way of life similar to the one that we are used to because it has global consequences and thus we have to try to do something about it and thus, at our individual level, we can try to do something about it.” (Antoine, sociologist, 30 years old, no kids).

It is interesting to note that these two persons express in one sentence their knowledge about climate change and their feeling that there is an urgency to act accordingly. And in fact, both

² Panel Study on Belgian Households, 7th wave, n=7000 persons aged 16 and over, representative sample at the first wave.

³ “Do you think that in twenty years, the Earth’s climate will be the same, warmer, colder or you do not know?”

⁴ The detailed results are the following:

- “To worry for the environment is urgent otherwise one risks to head towards a catastrophe”: 60% fully agree, 33% rather agree; this wide approbation would probably be lessened if this question was asked at the beginning of this survey on energy-related practices and representations, or in a survey on another topic, or after having given the respondent the opportunity to express his/her concerns for the environment in a softer way;
- “To worry for the environment is a fashionable phenomenon”: 25% rather disagree, 52% fully disagree. These figures show an effort to be consistent for two successive questions as, in total, nearly three persons out of four agree with the first catastrophe statement and disagree with the fashion one (Pearson’s R=-0.216, sig.=0.000);
- “To worry for the environment is something that one has to begin to take into account”: 78% fully agree, 21% rather agree.

are doing a lot in their dwelling to save energy. These two quotes suggest that the acknowledgement of global warming depends on (or is associated with) the acknowledgement of an injunction to personally act against it rather than to be only dependant on trust in experts, as was first hypothesised, following A. Giddens (1990). In our ten interviews, the interviewees who knew about global warming and spoke about it trusted the experts on this topic and/or called for the principle of precaution.

This hypothesised link between a perceived risk associated with climate change and a sense of agency seems consistent with the findings of Managhten and Urry (1998) and it is further confirmed in the large-scale 2004 survey (n=1000) where the respondents answering that in twenty years, the Earth's climate will be warmer are more numerous to totally agree with the catastrophe statement and to disagree with the fashion statement than the respondents who answer that the climate will stay the same or who answer that they do not know.⁵

In this 2004 survey, the majority of the respondents (two out of five) have indicated that they have not done much about energy savings in their dwelling. Furthermore, the mean scores for the question "Do you think that you have done your uttermost to save energy?" significantly vary with the opinion on the catastrophic state or not of the environment: when the respondents "fully agree" with this catastrophic state, they more often evaluate themselves as having done their uttermost to save energy whereas those who "rather agree", do not know or disagree with the catastrophic vision of the environment more often answer that they have not done much about energy savings in their dwelling.

The majority of respondents who indicated that they have not done much on energy savings in their dwelling also say that their reason for not doing so is that it is not a priority for them.⁶ The same respondents are also well informed about climate change and aware of their energy consumption. Furthermore, there is no significant difference in the personal evaluation on having done the uttermost to save energy and three energy-related practices (to turn of the light when leaving a room for 20 minutes; during the winter, to diminish the temperature during absence or overnight); this shows that information and awareness are no longer bringing about changes in practices, as implied by the long-prevailing model of rational action (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980, Azjen, 1985).

b. "World socialisation scheme" and fragmented rationales

This gap between environmental representations and household practices however matches well with the "world socialisation scheme" of most western societies, which is based on resources predation (Descola, 1998). According to this author, a "world socialisation scheme" is an ethical horizon that orients both the relationships to environment and the conception of social links and exchange. From his study of Amazon tribes, he distinguishes three schemes: predation, reciprocity and giving. In our western societies, "nature has become the simple

⁵ Levels of F statistical significance are 0.000 and 0.026 respectively.

⁶ This is the first discriminating variable, in a dozen variables introduced in a discriminant analysis, the dependant variable being: "Do you think that you have done your uttermost to save energy?" (n=665)

- 1- Is not a priority
- 2- Household-income quartile
- 3- It requires too much effort
- 4- Does not have the financial means

object of our indifferent predations” and this “world socialisation scheme” is made acceptable only thanks to a strong division “between humans and non-humans” (Descola, 1998:128).

This radical separation is echoed by the human-exemption paradigm, which makes us consider that our human societies, especially in developed countries, are the only ones, thanks to culture and technique, to exempt themselves from the constraints that nature opposes to social activities, a paradigm made clear by several environment sociologists (Vaillancourt, 1996, Managhten and Urry, 1998).

This division between humans and non-humans, which is also mental, may appear to be diffracted into numerous rationales that underlie specific practices, which thus seem to the observer to be uncoordinated with respect to their environmental consequences. An example may be found in interviews realised in Belgium at the end of the nineties, when household waste sorting was becoming either mandatory or recommended in most Belgian municipalities: grocery shopping was unanimously disconnected from household-waste production (Kestemont *et al.*, 2001). In the field of energy consumption, there are numerous studies, summarised by Lutzenhiser (1993) and Shove *et al.* (1998), which show that consumers are not often aware of the energy consumption that is required in their energy-related practices, either for bathing, communicating (Gram-Hanssen, 2005) or doing the house chores (Bartiaux, 2003). This mental compartmentalisation is observable even with persons or families with a strong environmental concern who have changed several aspects of their daily practices (but not in communicating practices: Gram-Hanssen, 2005) or with persons whose profession is related to energy savings.⁷

Another interpretation of these fragmented rationales, I shall argue, is a societal self-defence mechanism for avoiding a societal acknowledgment of the systemic characteristic of environmental issues and for avoiding a societal self-deception that would occur if this world socialisation scheme were to be abandoned as well as other societal values seen as quite important in our societies. One of these “myths” is the mass-consumption society.

2. Fear of losing his/her beliefs and commitment in a consumption society

At least three interviewees said, during the in-depth interview, that energy prices are not “very expensive”:

- “The energy (price) is quite decent” (Maria, twice in the same sentence)
- “(The electricity price is) not really expensive (...) I don’t find it very expensive” (Kristien)
- “When it was about an energy assessment procedure, I had completely forgotten about electricity, for example. But it’s true that it is also energy! And they also give tips, it is true that it is possible to limit consumption and avoid wasting (...) one is not always thinking [about these saving tips] for electricity whereas (for) gas, well, it’s more painful because one pays at the moment gas has to be paid and bills (are) huge, and oil, at the price it has ... (Luc)

These persons have quite different household incomes (they are respectively in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th quartiles) but all of them do enjoy an upper social position, probably accompanied by a rapid upward social movement for at least the first two quoted persons. It can thus be

⁷ For example, several energy advisors (mostly female architects) ‘discovered’ that eating meat or tropical fruits requires for their production and transportation more energy than having a vegetarian diet with locally-grown products (Conference on energy savings, Gembloux, Belgium, June 2003).

hypothesised that in the Belgian context, a desire to show one's social success is incompatible with the affirmation that energy prices – especially electricity price – are (too) high as there are some policy measures that provide the poorest with a minimal and guaranteed access to energy, while social stigmatisation of the poorest may be a side-effect of these measures.

The hypothesised association between the rapidity of social upward mobility and the economic motivation for energy savings was in fact first formulated by one of our interviewees (a sociologist!): “I have the impression that we (his spouse and himself) are in an ideal situation for saving energy because, as I was telling you, we both have a [modest] origin – I can not say “poor”, we should go backward at least to 2, 3 or 4 generations to be poor – but none of us has a consumption-oriented mentality; plus the social-security system, the fact that both of us hold a university degree and have jobs, which are not especially well paid but we largely have what is needed to live: therefore, we can afford ourselves to buy windows frames whose price is 25% higher because they are more ecological.” He thus suggests that an interest for energy savings is likelier (or only possible?) in middle or upper-class families that did not attain this status in one generation. This hypothesis should be tested in a larger sample but it is consistent with the work of Bourdieu (1979, see also Corcuff, 1996, 2001) and with the following observation that the ‘nouveaux riches’ are the least prone to saving energy: such a young couple tells that since the energy assessment procedure, “the doors are a little more closed but it has not become excessive, certainly not, but yet, we pay more attention”. The use of the passive voice (“the doors are a little more closed”) and the word “excessive” seem to indicate that they don't want to give an image of themselves as being “excessively” concerned with economic savings – they have a rather good income (3rd quartile, living in pair) – and they “never really asked themselves” about a link between energy consumption and environment, as asked by the interviewer. She then asks whether they follow “Kyoto and the like” and his answer is “We have studied that at school. For the rest, no.”

Altogether, the quotes in this section also suggest that the openness to environmental information may be related to both the current social position and the familial trajectories leading to this social status.

3. Social valorisation of subjectivity

The rationales' fragmentation may also be associated with the growing social valorisation of subjectivity, which deepens the active ignorance of nature and environment issues in several ways, which I shall try to show by tracking rhetoric figures in the in-depth interviews.

a. Least production of a sense of solidarity and euphemistic behaviours

Firstly, the growing social valorisation of subjectivity prevents the production of a sense of solidarity (Martucelli, 2002: 509) within and between generations or between species.

Laughs and ironic statements are to be found at the end of the interview with the young couple just quoted above:

- (Int.) “And for you, the environment evolution, is it something that frightens you? Pollution, climate change... do you think about that?”
- (He) “Neither do we have the plan to buy an apartment at the sea coast, so if the sea (level) rises... (laughs)”

- (She) “But nevertheless, I tell myself that when⁸ you have kids...
- (He) “By itself, we are not really conscious of that. Whether the Scheldt is flooding Antwerp or not doesn’t prevent us from sleeping... for the moment, at least. It is so far away that one has no conscience of that.”

“So far” is about 40 kilometres in this case... And the wife, as other women in other interviews, suggests that having her own kids will develop her sense of solidarity between generations and an acknowledgment of the risks associated with environmental issues.

In the next quote, the solidarity is local (if not familial) though the topic could have called for a global sense of solidarity. By giving examples that are not related to his point, Michel, an executive in marketing who was trained in ecology, orients the interview otherwise, in a way more favourable to him, as he does not do much about energy savings: he first commits a slip of the tongue by speaking about “rational savings of energy” and the interviewer politely corrects him:

- (Int.) “And you told me about rational use of energy: what do you mean?”
- (He) “It’s precisely to take care of all (aspects of) heating consumption, not to heat uselessly. For example, here, we have a water tank (...), we recycle household-waste (...) we have a garden with compost (...)”

By shedding the light on behaviours that are pleasant, mild or indirect instead of more accurate or direct ones – the definition of a euphemism – these examples of water tanks, recycling or composting are what I shall call euphemistic behaviours. And they are widespread in our interviews; waste-sorting being the most cited euphemistic behaviour.

b. Valorisation of eclecticism and self-esteem bonuses

The valorisation of subjectivity further encourages eclecticism, by which some environmentally friendlier practices happen to be picked for the “self-esteem bonuses” (Moezzi, 2000) they are carrying (for example, buying an A+ appliance but using it more often). Once these self-esteem bonuses have been granted (or self-granted), the consumers may actively defend them: “I have bought an A+ washing machine, now let me do my laundry as I want to!” uttered a woman in a focus group, implying “Don’t bother me anymore with further demands about soap, temperature or whatever!”⁹

Eclecticism is difficult to valorise in the context of an energy assessment procedure as so many behaviours that appear fragmented to the “consumer” are suddenly reunified and evaluated with the same grid of energy consumption.

One of our interviewees however finds the need and the way to justify several of her behaviours with arguments that are socially better accepted than the need for economic savings or an environmental concern: she has no dryer because she has a garden, she prefers showering because bathing is bothering for her, she switches off the lights when leaving a room because she was educated like that, she has no car because she lives nearby supermarkets and her job place pays for her seasonal train ticket, and so on and so forth. She wants to show an image of herself as a “self-made woman” who has succeeded in arriving at a rather good social position.

⁸ Or « if » rather than « when »₂ as it is the same word in Dutch.

⁹ Rousseau, C., personal communication on focus groups held in Brussels in 2003.

c. Subjectivity and limited agency in a reflexive society

As seen above, euphemisms soften ideas that are unpleasant, shocking or sad. In our interviews (either in French or in Dutch), a very common type of euphemism is an understated opposition expressed with “*quand même*” or “*toch*”, the French and Dutch equivalents of “though” or “however”. Does that mean that the interviewees feel the contradictions that push and refrain them from (not) implementing the energy-savings advices received? Clara uses it quite often: 34 times! For example, the interviewer begins by asking her whether energy consumption was a criterion when remodelling their newly bought house and Clara answers “[...] but we were a little limited as it was already a house to remodel so we couldn’t do everything as I had seen and found interesting, but we couldn’t do anything and then, at the budget level, also. But we asked though, thus for the boiler, we had asked though something [...] the most efficient.” She is “a little green” and she “thinks that she could do more” to be better informed and to act up. But her husband is “not (interested), he follows a little the move” (another euphemism: “he follows a little”) and does not offer her enough support to change their habits.

d. Occultation of a narcissistic wound

Finally, this metonymical behaviour enables one to remove the perspective of a narcissistic wound due to the impossibility of controlling the course of events and of nature, a growing concern in Europe, as shown by several opinion surveys (Stead, 2005).

Litotes means suggesting a positive aspect by negating its contrary (“it’s not bad” for “it’s very good”). An example of litotes is given by Luc, who first introduced himself as follows: “Energy and the like, that has always interested me. I am a financier and for my enterprise, I also have to make energy comparisons”; later he says: “In the bedroom of our little one – it’s the last one [window of the house] with only simple glass and it’s true that it is again the wall and sometimes, it is windy and one feels that there is an insulation that is not optimal...” This “not optimal” is a litotes that protects Luc against acknowledging an identity contradiction – he doesn’t act as a father as he does for his enterprise – and slacks up action without reducing his self-esteem nor his sense of agency.

4. Conclusion

Drawing upon recent surveys done in Belgium, mainly on energy consumption, I have tried in this paper to show that the openness to environmental information depends on the possibility for the consumer to hear about it, which appears to imply or to necessitate an agency feeling. This selectiveness of information is thus to be related to both the current social position and the familial trajectories leading to this social status. The systemic characteristic of environmental issues seem to be a threshold and when it is not acknowledged, consumers justify their behaviours with what can appear as fragmented rationales. I have later proposed to interpret this societal deafness as a societal self-defence mechanism for avoiding a societal self-deception that would occur if this world socialisation scheme were to be abandoned, and altogether other societal values seen as quite important in our societies. These “myths” include the mass-consumption society and the social valorisation of subjectivity.

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