Basic needs in the dynamics of Demand

Exploring media discourses, households practices and related rationales

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore, through various disciplinary and empirical prisms, the dynamics that underlie the social norms relating to energy consumption (on this issue see in particular Shove 2009 and Shove et al 2012). In order to go beyond rationalizing, individualist and behaviourist approaches and to gain a better understanding of the underlying rationales, we will approach this subject through the question of the constitution and evolution of social norms and the underlying registers of discourse and action, analysing the dialectic processes through which the dynamics of social norms are formed. The originality of our approach is that it involves a semiological and sociological comparison of the socio-discursive imaginaries (Castoriadis, 1975) of essential needs – energy-related in particular. We therefore perform a cross-cutting analysis which puts into perspective two disciplinary approaches to the issue. They are rarely cross-cut but we feel that they each shed interesting and complementary light on the subject.

The two analyses (semiological and sociological) were performed in parallel. Their main results and associated methodologies are set out in parts 2 and 3 of this article. We conclude the article with a comparison of the results of the two types of analysis in order to examine the relevant differences, convergences and reflections (part 4). It remains essentially "empirically-based" and exploratory.

2. Essential energy needs. Analysis of socio-discursive representations in the French written press

In this first section we explore the socio-discursive imaginaries (Castoriadis, 1975) of essential needs – energy-related in particular.

2.1 Methodology and corpus of analysis

We make the hypothesis that the discourses produced by the media play a certain role in the evolution of representations and mentalities, and that they ultimately influence the behaviour of consumer-citizens "in as much as the act of speaking in the world, changes the world" (Achard 1993). Yet lay discourses also influence those of experts and the media and illustrate perception of essential needs in a different way. If we take seriously the idea that "by its very utterance, any speech-act purports to be legitimate" (Maingueneau 1997), the question of a comparison between media discourses and those of consumers merits attention.

The media corpus we used was compiled through external documentary research (between January 2013 and November 2014) based on the following keywords: *"essential need", essential needs", "basic needs", "right to energy", "essential energy needs"* and *"essential energy need"* in the national,

regional and economic/financial press[1]. This corpus produced just *24 pertinent articles* (only 5 of which highlighted a concrete link between "essential needs" and "energy consumption")[2].

2.2 The notion of "essential needs": needs fundamental to an individual's well-being and proper to the fulfilment of social relationships

Regarding the concept if "essential needs" (taken in the broadest sense), several articles in the French media corpus demonstrated that this notion is embedded in *multiple and varied discourses*. The latter deal just as much with matters relating to the family and education, as with political (sometimes almost philosophical) thinking on ways of running the country, alternative avenues for economic development (an economy of needs), or the theme of well-being and social progress and their impact on economic performance[3]. Media discourse is characterised by a high level of intellectualization of its message. The articles' understanding of the notion of essential needs is embedded in a *broad sphere* which structures a very strong relationship between the individual and Society. Essential need immediately comes across not just as a founding principle of our personal fulfilment, but also as a *determining factor in an individual's harmonious social relationships*.

The social link dimension is so strong that it is expressed as a new essential need: that of connection between individuals (NICT). The satisfaction of the essential needs of human beings thus appears to be the determining factor for fulfilled and properly performing societies, including on an economic level. Several articles even mention the emergence, with the arrival of the internet and NICTs, of a new need, even more fundamental than the physiological need: that of connection between individuals.

2.3 The essential need for energy: a vested right that is not contested (and which is therefore seldom substantiated or explained)

If we focus our analyses on the issue of energy in the media corpus, the essential need to have access to energy is essentially referred to as a right which is vested, asserted and reasserted as such; it *is not contested,* but nor is it completely clear what it comprises (the satisfaction of global demand? That of ordinary everyday household consumption? Guaranteed access to essential services?). So when energy is stated to be an essential need, it appears as one of the elements in an *indicative list* (water, energy, housing, healthcare, etc.), without giving rise to an additional discussion or specification. It is true that several articles question government policies which affect public services and thus the capacity of the poorest populations to meet certain fundamental and universal needs. But in this case it is not the notion of an essential energy need which is substantiated, specified, or discussed; it is the country's mode of governance in relation to the management of essential needs (including access to energy) that is called into question.

These media discourses are part of a dual register which we will now set out.

2.3.1 The register relating to poverty and social injustice

Even though very few articles tackle "essential energy need" head-on, in France this notion would seem to be immediately associated with the idea of a precarious and dysfunctional social situation, and thus to implicitly or explicitly relate to guaranteed access for everyone to a basic service essential for "survival"[4]. Quantitatively speaking, the articles which most explicitly mention this notion of essential energy need tend to be articles written in the so-called left-wing media (l'Humanité, Libération …). They thus embed the debate within a highly "political/politicised" framework, linking the

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[1] Le Monde, L'Humanité, Alternatives Economiques, Le Figaro.fr, La Tribune, Le Parisien, Les Echos, L'Alsace, Libération, Aujourd'hui en France, L'Opinion, L'Humanité.

[2] The use of additional and more varied keywords such as *fuel poverty* or *energy prices* would certainly have allowed us to have a larger corpus but in this particular study we deliberately chose to restrict the choice to keywords which refer specifically to the concept of *essential need*.

[3] *L'innovation sociale, au service du bien-être*, Alternatives économiques, Juin 2013, *L'économie sociale et solidaire, une autre mondialisation*, Libération, 11.11.2013, *De nouveaux objectifs pour le développement*, Les Echos, 03.10.2013, *Enfin, la France va reconnaitre la contribution des entreprises sociales à l'économie !*, La Tribune, 05.08.2013.

[4] *Comment lutter à la fois contre la pauvreté et le changement climatique*, La Tribune, 13.08.2014, *Les inégalités de revenus n'affectent pas que les pauvres*, Libération, 18.10.2013, *Précarité. Lutter contre la pauvreté passe par un combat pour l'accès aux droits. En finir avec les idées fausses*, L'Alsace, 15.10.2013.

idea of an essential energy need to a form of *social struggle*. Indeed, a number of articles in the corpus clearly include substantive reflections (by researchers, intellectuals, philosophers, etc.) on *"social progress"* (its benefits in absolute terms and its impact on a country's economic performance), or on a *denunciation of inequalities*. Implicitly it would seem that in France the issue of essential energy needs has more to do with an *ideological approach or a somewhat humanist vision of the world and of society*, than with a pragmatic and utilitarian/utilitarist approach to the notion of needs (as would appear to be the case in another study on the British media[5]). The *ideological aspect* of media discourses is a powerful one, imprinting the idea of a far more "charged" notion (emotionally and symbolically) than would seem to be the case in Great Britain.

2.3.2 *The register of change and of (the need for) renewal*
At the same time, other articles[6] focus their headlines on the *end of previous models (economic or societal)*, or even on their failure, and on the idea of an expected or hoped-for renewal. The idea is thus also that in order to take account of essential needs, it is necessary to introduce an *alternative* to classic models of society which have had their day, and that this alternative is part of a (social) innovation or even "revolution".

- The actors concerned
In this transformation of society, described as a necessity, the role of the State, of the government (and more generally of the powers that be) would of course appear to be a major one, but the articles underline just as much its role as a brake, as its role as a driving force for change. According to several of the articles, the State is not (or is no longer) performing its primary task: that of ensuring that the essential needs of its citizens are met and of making sure that inequalities are done away with. These discourses illustrate the defiance - not only towards policies but also towards the media – that we find in several opinion polls and studies.

- Solutions which come mainly from civil society
The articles also underline the extent to which change is already underway - creative, inventive and dynamic – through *social innovators*, the *new generation* and new forms of cooperation. It is solely from the depths of civil society that change would appear to be emerging. Innovation, social networks and platforms are all elements which illustrate the social dynamic that drives technological innovation – digitalization of the economy in particular.

2.4 Conclusion on the media
All in all, there is an essential need for energy which, in France, is embedded in the notion of solidarity and of a universal and continuous access guaranteed for all: the new essential need to connect to digital services (internet, mobile phone networks, etc.) effectively implies guaranteed permanent access to energy. We will now look at how individuals express their essential energy needs.

3. Essential energy needs as expressed by individuals: a qualitative study of energy-related practices and trade-offs

Our case study derives from the ENERGYHAB[7] collaborative project within which a set of complementary methods was used to collect various types of data: quantitative survey (2000 households), qualitative study (60 interviews, 21 of which are analysed here), diaries and monitored data. We were mainly involved in the qualitative part of the project, based on observation (semi-structured interviews all conducted in people's homes) looking at the way(s) people live and analyse their daily practices, underlying representations and logics of action[8].

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[5] Neil Simcock, *Exploring discourses of 'necessary' energy use in the UK media: implications for demand-side policy and governance*, DEMAND Centre, Lancaster University.

[6] *Pour un nouveau modèle français*, Le Monde, 04.01.2013, *Le monde qui s'écroule aujourd'hui sous nos yeux est le produit d'un modèle économique éprouvé*, L'Humanité, 25.01.2013, *Surmonter la crise politique grâce à une économie de la gratuité*, Les Echos, 17.09.2014.

[7] ENERGYHAB – Energy Consumption, from home to city – social, technical and economic aspects". This four-year project was conducted in partnership with the UMR CNRS- LAVUE and the CSTB. It was funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR).

[8] Main themes covered regarding representations and uses related to energy consumption: domestic activities and related

3.1 Methodology and constitution of the corpus

In order to put the analysis of media discourses into perspective with regard to the expression of essential needs as expressed by the interviewed households, we performed a tailor-made secondary analysis. Our choice in this paper was to extract a qualitative sub-sample of twenty-two households living in various areas of the Greater Paris region[9] interviewed throughout 2011 (average interview duration: 1:30), and to focus on the lower-income middle class in order to better 'capture' the notion of essential needs briefly described below:

- Single women with (7) or without (4) children, active (8) or retired (3)
- Single men with (2) or without (2) children, active (2) or retired (2)
- Couples with (5) or without (2) children, active (6) or retired (1)
- Household income: X ≤ 1700 euros/month (11) and X >1700 / ≤2200 euro/months (11) (which is often the case of persons who have experienced a change in situation leading to a loss of income (losing a job, retiring, separation, blended families, for example).

One pitfall of the secondary analysis is that the initial interviews were not conducted for the specific purpose that interests us here (for example, there was no direct question concerning their essential needs, even though in some cases the interviewees "spontaneously" mentioned this aspect). We nevertheless made the hypothesis that the initial study covered a sufficiently broad range of aspects for us to be able, with the appropriate methodology (Kaufmann, 2004), to bring out the explicit or implicit discourse on essential needs. To achieve this, after a "broad" analysis of the content of the interviews and with an indirect interpretation of the notion of need (which is identified as obvious, necessary or "out of reach", a series of dimensions and needs came to light; these were organised into 4 main themes, which as we will see later on are in various respects often interwoven: having a home; having food; being mobile; being connected.

3.2 Essential needs in four broadly interwoven fields: having a home; having food; being mobile; being connected

As we will see in this section, on certain points the results of the analysis of the interviews with the households are similar to those found in the media discourse analysis, even if they are not expressed in the same way.

For the interviewees, having a home, having one's own domestic space (more often than not rented) is vital – an essential and undeniable *requirement*. Not having a "place to call home" is *unthinkable*. Similarly, access to running water in the home is part and parcel of everyday habits and routines; people rarely mention this aspect and when they do it is as something obvious, as Kaufmann (1992) notably pointed out in relation to the activity of ironing sheets. It follows that the essential needs expressed during the course of the interviews shifted from the capacity to find a home, towards the notion of "feeling minimally content at home" and, at the same time, towards the resources/equipment required to fulfil this desire.

3.2.1 Housing: well-being at home

A range of equipment linked to a material culture that remains dominant would appear to impose itself on the households interviewed. These appliances/equipment are fairly unanimously considered to relate to essential needs, because they constitute the condition allowing one to feel "content at home". They are characterised by the fact of being transverse to the accomplishment of various domestic activities.

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appliances/equipment; activities taking place in the home; mobility and links with the region; the temporality of these activities and the appliances/equipment used; how appliances/equipment are used (heating, cooking, lighting, leisure and communication); attention paid to energy and water consumption and to sorting waste; perception of housing comfort; the ecological issue and political and institutional messages encouraging greater restraint.

[9] Région Ile-de-France.

First we find infrastructures and appliances/equipment relating to the *need for light* (windows, "well-oriented home" and artificial daylight) and, unsurprisingly, to the need for warmth: access to a heating system, albeit expressed in varying manners (the minimal temperatures mentioned varied from 17° to more than 22°C). This said, light and heating were the objects of almost constant attention and were most often mentioned in terms of regulation that were particularly noticeable in situations of rupture (*"we'll put the heating on later, in the Autumn. We'll turn it off earlier /…/ A while back it was cold, but we didn't put it back on. Back in the day maybe we'd have put it back on. Sometimes it lasts longer, when it lasts for a fortnight, maybe we'd have put it back on then". W*oman who had lost her job, in couple, one child).

Additionally, we should underline the fundamental and non-negotiable attitude expressed in relation to appliances/equipment which make it possible to *create an atmosphere*, especially a *sound* (and in some cases visual) environment. This generally involves equipment which provides access to music, to the news (TV, radio, Hi-fi, MP3, computer for streaming, etc.), which fairly systematically takes place at the same time as other activities often referred to as "main" activities (for example, cooking, working, washing, washing clothes, supervising the children's homework, reading/writing one's mail). For the interviewees, the use of such equipment creates a sort of continuous presence; the appliances become companions that can be mobilised in all circumstances and at any time, and at the same time they represent a *virtual link with the world* and help avoid the dreaded risk of social isolation. Unlike lighting and heating, use of these appliances is almost never restricted.

On the other hand, another set of electrical equipment is considered to be *more or less useful, or of secondary importance*: people can easily do without them, do not buy them, do not renew them when they stop working; and when people do have them, they are rarely used and are deemed to be only of minor interest. This is particularly the case of microwave ovens, dishwashers and clothes dryers. Air conditioning was never mentioned among the needs of the study population. Some appliances are used to their fullest extent, for all their diverse functions, whilst others are under-used. Let us take the example of the microwave oven: it can be used to cook, defrost or reheat food, yet it is only mentioned in the interviews for its reheating/defrosting functions, never for cooking. On the other hand, cooking as a practice would seem to enrol groups of technical objects that allow people to link up socially (TV, computer, radio, etc.). In fact, in most cases when people are cooking, the computer, the radio or the TV are more often called upon than the microwave – they are appliances which "accompany" the activity.

3.2.2. Being connected: using ICTs, a need that has become essential in order to be part of the system, with a use that is pretty much non-negotiable

Unlike microwave ovens, ICTs are often overused, with people putting them to a wide variety of uses – for example computers have become an alternative to televisions. They are a support for an increasing number of activities: office work, the internet, video conversations (Skype), listening to the radio, watching television, camera, alarm clock – they are thus subject to the inventiveness of the individual.

Communication and information technologies would indeed seem to be at the very heart of the daily essential domestic needs that were expressed. Energy uses in these fields of activity (leisure as well as work) are therefore not very or not at all restricted, although the interviewees recognised that these types of leisure (and sometimes work-related) facilities are usually quite energy-consuming. Their use is thus an assumed consumption, a choice claimed as a source of convenience and pleasure, rooted in a logic of compensation from the register of deprivation.

In addition, these types of equipment are on the increase and their dynamic of use dynamic is becoming increasingly individualised[10] because they have become essential in terms of social inclusion, particularly when it comes to doing homework, searching for information, working at home or looking for a job[11]. They are also the object of a marked generational effect (highly differentiated uses).

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[10] *"Ah yes, we are three, we have three computers! Ah yes, I think that we're really starting to get addicted to electronics, really."* (women, in couple, one teen-ager).

[11] "I've got the Freebox. I have a cell phone since I became unemployed. My husband has a cell phone, but he hasn't had it for very long. He has a cell phone, but only since 2006." (*W*oman who had lost her job, in couple, one child).

3.2.3   Eating well and healthily on a limited budget

Very significant trade-offs are made in this area, and they come in a variety of modalities: cooking with fresh produce rather than buying ready-made meals, cooking in the oven rather than in the microwave (so that dishes can be slow-cooked; "proper cooking"), buying fruit and vegetables at the market and keeping supermarket shopping for so-called "basic" products (washing powder, etc.).

On the other hand, organic food sold in shops is generally considered to be financially *out of reach* ("organic products are easily 20% more expensive than standard food", "as far as organic food is concerned, we've tried, but financially speaking it's just not possible") or *outside confidence limits* (scepticism towards something considered to be a "passing fad" or a "commercial rip-off"). This said, where possible, people use their own resources and develop their own capacities to act (the notion of "capabilities", Sen, 1985): they create their own vegetable plot and eat what they produce (grown in the garden or on the balcony) or what is given by the family, neighbours or friends.

3.2.4   Being mobile: using the car, an ambivalent need that is essential and non-negotiable for some; or entirely secondary for others

As might be expected (Massot and Orfeuil, 2005; Desjardins and Mettéal, 2012), opinions are split on whether one is obliged to use a car, depending on the region where the interviewees live, its characteristics and its layout in terms of infrastructures and access to services (leisure activities, shopping, trips to school, commuting). Generally speaking, the Parisian interviewees (Paris and inner suburbs) use public transport and the inhabitants of the outer suburbs own one or two cars – an expense they feel to be obligatory ("well, if you don't have a car, you're in trouble, you can't do anything"). In the outer suburbs, the interviewees made a strong connection between car/eating well/health when on a restricted budget: you go by car to the big supermarket which is the cheapest but which is furthest from home, to buy goods that are non-perishable, or in large quantities, which then allows you to continue to buy fresh produce from your market which is nearby but more expensive. The trade-off is also made – particularly during long commutes on public transport – in terms of time saved and tiredness. In all cases (and despite a sometimes expressed sensibility), clean cars (electric) remain financially inaccessible, even if they are desired. On the other hand, cars which are considered to be an essential need are often old second-hand cars, sometimes diesel (less expensive than petrol in France). Finally (although we cannot go into further detail in this short article) what the interviewees said, and the structuring role of several policy areas, would seem to fit in with "the cargo function of the car" identified by Mattioli et al (2015).

3.2.5   The actors and the system

Not only the media and so called formal experts but also the households interviewed expressed their own views about "How the system works". Their expression is translated mainly through a register of *defiance.* Most of the interviewed households actually expressed a certain lack of confidence not only towards commercial or industrial discourses but also towards institutional ones (among others … media and political discourses). They felt that the latter are not always coherent and they considered that public institutions do not show "exemplary behaviour" (i.e. they do not themselves act in a way that is coherent with what they advocate for others).

This observed defiance towards "formal" experts has implications for households and the ways they mobilize resources to make choices in their daily lives in order to avoid potentially contradictory situations and rationalities. Households then use their own social and cultural capital and update it – more or less consciously – by mobilising various resources in which they trust (e.g. their peers, family, social networks, neighbours … and themselves i.e. based on their own experiences and incorporated knowledge). As such, they demonstrate many more "capabilities" than the media seem to credit them with.

3.3 Conclusion of the sociological section

To conclude our case study, we must point out the generational effects which were identified in various areas of everyday life by the majority of the interviewees and which are in line with other works (Gram-Hanssen Kirsten, 2005, Gram-Hanssen Kirsten, 2011). They can be seen in the following comments: "*as far as my daughter is concerned, we're behind the times because we don't have a microwave in the house*" (Women, in couple, one girl teen-ager) or "*So I get cross, because that annoys me, but on the other hand we can't really, I mean it's the way teenagers live nowadays isn't it? /…/ in the evening they've so much to tell one another! If that's the way they have to live, then I'll go along with that!*" (Men, blended family, 3 teen-agers). We must also underline the importance of "*treating oneself*" even when one has a limited budget for essential needs. In effect, the interviewees often make concessions, on the condition that they can keep hold of some of their dreams in their everyday lives. For example: "*I tend to read in bed every evening /…/ and yes, I have a ceiling light, with five little bulbs. It's not very economical, but there you go …*" (Men, single, two children) or another interviewee "*I admit I didn't pay attention, I didn't look [at the prices]. But it's true that I needed a big screen for the computer that was my dream.*" (Men, single, no children). Finally, we must stress the convergence between our analysis and that made in parallel with focus groups in the UK as part of the DEMAND project (Simcock and Walker 2015).

4. Cross-cut views, differences and convergences from the analysis of our different corpuses

When we put into perspective the analysis of the two types of corpus under consideration in the article (written press and interviews with households), we can immediately see a difference in *tone* in the way that essential energy needs are *put into words*. Media "staging" basically embeds social imaginaries (Castoriadis, 1975) in political socio-discursive arenas which are highly intellectualised or even philosophical and idealized. The comments are embedded in debates and thinking which are located at the level of society and its components. On the other hand, when we look at what the interviewees say, we see that the essential needs that they mention for the most part relate to a *pragmatic* register which is part of the *ordinary consumption* register and of *social DIY* (Javeau 2001, De Certeau 1980), the result of a set of minor arrangements and everyday trade-offs. We also see that households appear to be far more able to mobilise their *capabilities* (Sen, 1985) than the French press we analysed gives them credit for.

This said, in both types of corpus the notion of *essential needs* covers a wide spectrum ranging from housing/well-being at home, hygiene and health, to mobility and travel and even to the need for a certain level of harmony. Some equipment and practices are described as obvious, essential and non-negotiable and are identified as not being discussed in the media corpus, or else as "acquired rights" in the interviews, but without people's discourses being politicised – unlike the media who focus on aspects of poverty and social injustice. Even if the registers of discourse are different, it is not a question of "two separate worlds": the circulation of discourses through the different spheres is identifiable and the mutual influences of expert and lay opinions are real. Updating them through the identification of different types of reformulation and re-appropriation (Authier-Revuz, 1995) could be the object of future analyses.

Furthermore, both analyses highlight a social dimension that is so strong that it is at root of a need which has become essential – that of connection between individuals, of their *inclusion* in the system and of the avoidance of social isolation (ICTs). For different reasons, NICTs have become vital basic pieces of equipment: to remain in contact with the outside world, to link up, but also to access the job market.

Finally, regarding methodology, working on essential needs means thinking about needs that are often highly incorporated and which have therefore been glossed over, and this is a methodological problem. How can we approach the ordinary and the inexpressible? Using what question: "What is an essential energy need?" or "What is energy for? We believe that the multidisciplinary work (in this case semiological and sociological) that we have done and which cross-cuts views of the same question, allows us:
- to consolidate the results. As mentioned above, the results of our analysis which compared expert discourse with lay discourse, agree on a certain number of points;

- to decentre ourselves in order to "see something else". By decentring their point of view, analysts can see elements which they do not usually get to see and to ask themselves new questions;

- to assert with greater certainty the evolving tendencies of social norms identifiable in the different types of corpus analysed using tools and methods from the disciplines mobilised.

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