

Deciphering Consumption and Business in a Globalized World

Insights from Anthropology and Cultural Studies



Professeur Emérite à l'université de Paris-Cité (Sorbonne sciences humaines)

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Patricia L. Sunderland
Rita M. Denny

**Penser la consommation
et l'entreprise dans
un monde globalisé**

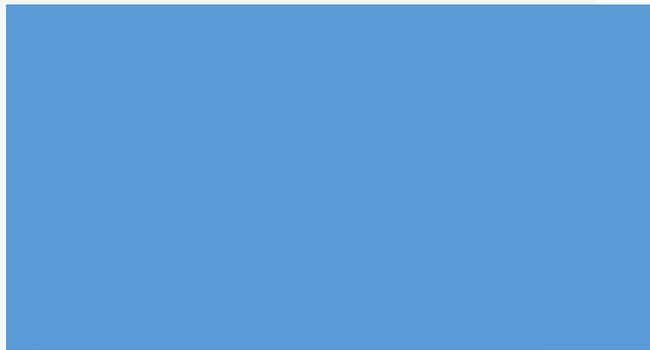
**L'éclairage de l'anthropologie
et des *cultural studies***



Textes présentés par
Dominique Desjeux

L'Harmattan
LOGIQUES SOCIALES

Methodological Introduction



To act differently, we must shift our perspective on reality.

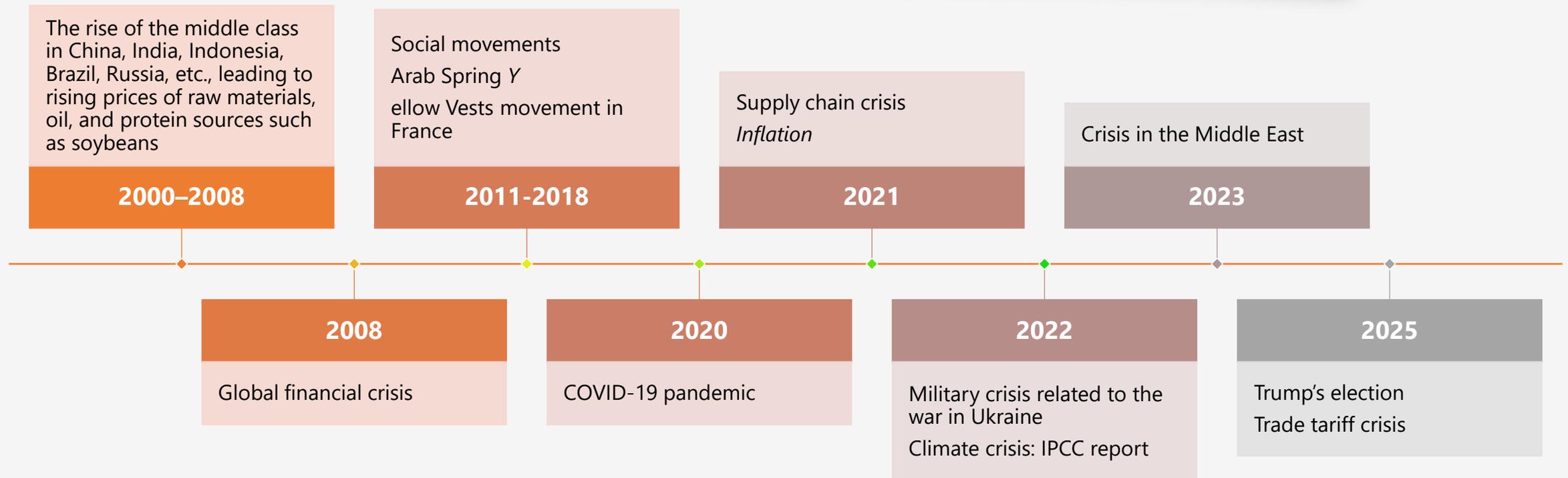
Observing consumption requires a constant back-and-forth between:

- individuel et collectif,
 - the static and the dynamic,
 - convergence and conflictuality,
 - the part and the system,
- The lens varies more according to the problems to be solved than according to theoretical models, which themselves result from observation and from the choice of a lens—that is, a scale of observation.

A comprehensive approach to society and consumption is impossible.

- ❑ The objective is not to criticize other approaches to consumption,
- ❑ but to present the diversity of possible analytical lens,
- ❑ to demonstrate that the various dimensions of consumption cannot all be captured at once including in anthropology,
- ❑ and therefore, that a mobile and multidisciplinary approach to reality is necessary, If we are to rethink consumption in the context of climate change and growing risks of war

The accumulation of “systemic” crises calls on us to rethink the role of consumption in our societies.



Understanding the diversity of perspectives for observing consumption: what triggers consumers' decisions?

- ❑ Marketing tends to focus on individual explanations, seeking to understand motivations, meaning, neurobiological effects, cognition, biases, brand influence, identity, and values.
 - Social affiliations and actor dynamics remain invisible.

- ❑ Macrosociology and macroeconomics aim to understand how structures consumer behavior through collective variables such as social, cultural, generational, or gender affiliations.
 - These variables are considered outside specific situations and, therefore, without actor dynamics.

- ❑ Anthropology emphasizes the collective, systems, actor dynamics, constraints, conflicts and situational effects. American anthropology and management sciences in France also focus on identities and values.
 - Social affiliation variables are less visible.

Four methods for shifting observation

The scales of observation

Action system

Trajectory method

Life course changes

The different scales for analyzing consumer decisions

Macrosocial level:
correlation



Geopolitics (crises)
Social classes
Generations
Gender
Cultures

What is visible at one scale disappears at another scale. Moreover, causality changes: from correlation to situation.

Mesosocial level:
situational dynamics



Action system
Provisioning system

Microsocial level:
situation



Social interaction
Trajectory method

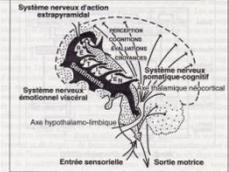
Micro-individual level:
meaning and correlation



individual

The individual is not the center of the world. There is no fixed center: a problem, an opportunity, or a driver of change can arise from anywhere..

Neurobiological level:
correlation



Biology

Fig. 11-5 : Les relations entre émotions et comportement. Représentation schématisée, dans le cerveau de l'homme, des grands axes du traitement de l'information viscérale: l'axe hypothalamique et limbique des sentiments, et l'axe thalamocortical de la pensée. Ces flux d'informations convergent sur le cortex reptilien et les ganglions de la base. Les flux émotifs sont plus concernés par l'information en provenance de la vision, de l'audition, du toucher, et sont influencés uniquement par le monde extérieur alors que les parties plus ventrales sont concernées par le sens de sensations chimiques (goût, odeurs, température, sauts d'hormones, énergie corporelle) et attention de l'axe corporelle. Les deux flux d'information convergent vers les ganglions de la base pour initier des comportements dans lesquels les processus visuels et somatiques sont combinés pour assurer la cohérence du comportement. D'après J. P. Dombovy (1995).

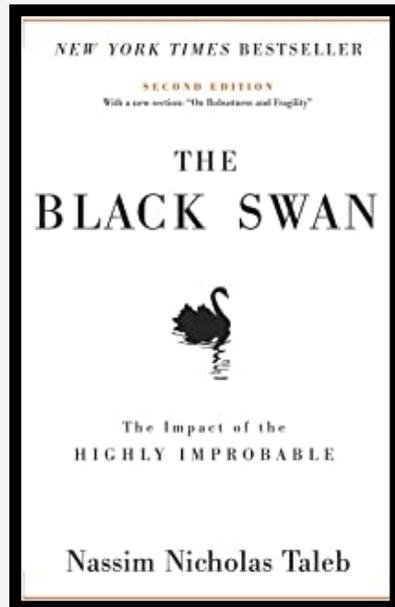
Chinese scale of observation

<https://youtu.be/3YFla8ZFMP8>

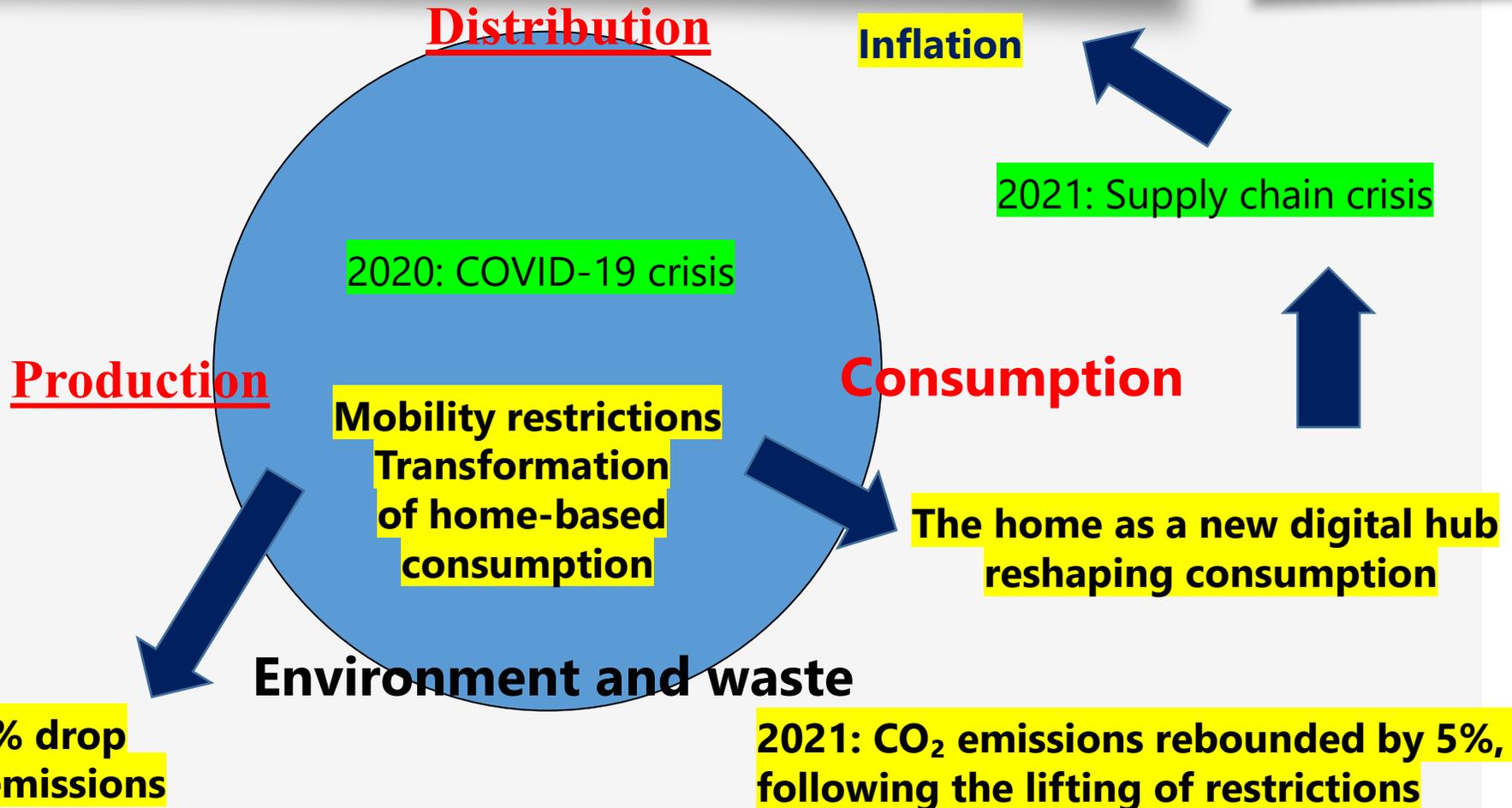
Society can be understood as a vast system of action structured by logistical and energy constraints and by transformations in everyday life.

Since 2010: China–Taiwan–US tensions

2022: War in Ukraine



2020: 5% drop in CO₂ emissions



2020: COVID-19 crisis

Inflation

2021: Supply chain crisis

Production

Mobility restrictions
Transformation of home-based consumption

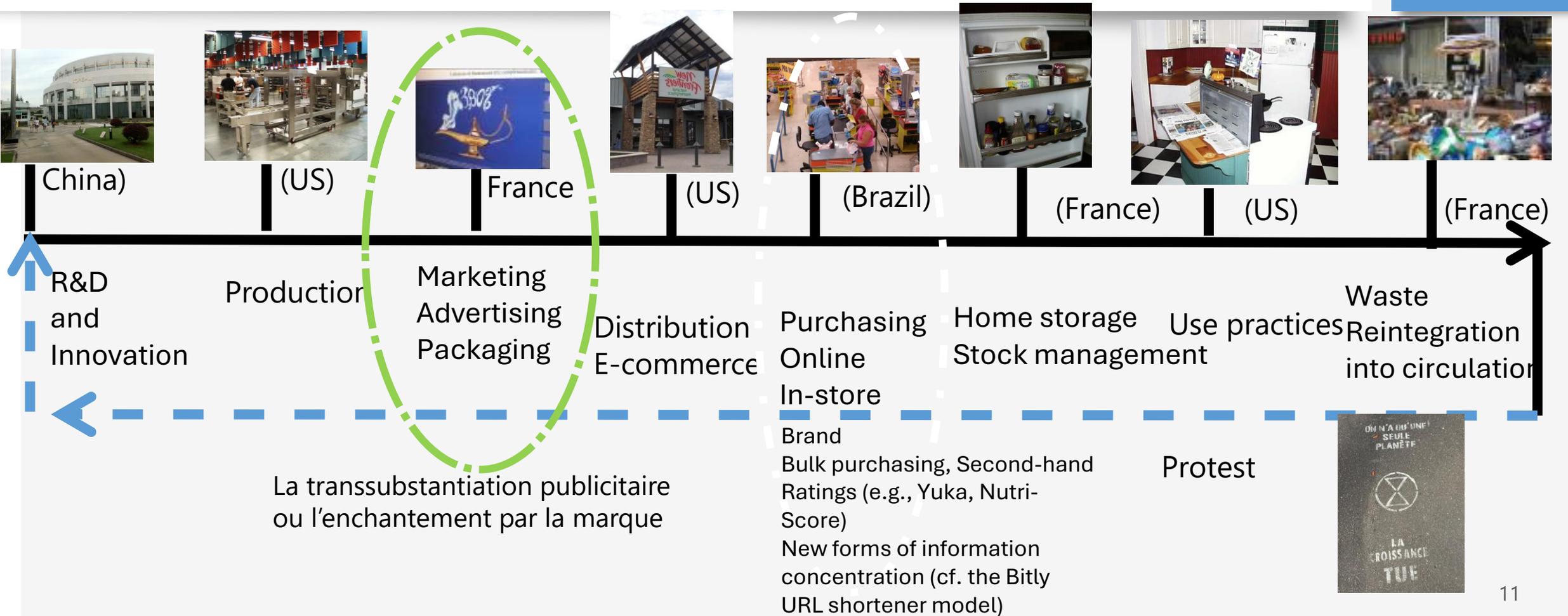
Consumption

The home as a new digital hub reshaping consumption

Environment and waste

2021: CO₂ emissions rebounded by 5%, following the lifting of restrictions

The non-linear trajectory from R&D to the final consumer and back into the recirculation of objects, or the problematic stages in how companies try to capture consumers



Stage 6
Work

The handbag and the leather briefcase as markers of gender differentiation



Stage 5
University

Emergence of two distinct uses: for going out and for classes, leather (and high-heeled shoes).
Smaller bag size, less prominently displayed brands



Stage 4
High school



Eastpak (Nike, Adidas)
→ Brand dominance linked to peer influence and personal signaling
→ But stigmatization of others

Stage 3
Middle school



End of the traditional schoolbag, perceived as childish.
Form: backpack / shoulder bag.
Marker of belonging to a peer group.
Use: school and outings with friends.
Soft material; suitable for both school and social outings

Stage 2
Primary School



Rectangular shape
Material: rigid
Stronger utilitarian function
The importance of the brand increases

Stage 1
Preschool



Transitional object, following the teddy bear.
→ The brand begins to play a role.
→ Weak utilitarian function.

Stages

Material
Function
Use
Form
Brand

Fieldwork conducted among students around 2000.

It is by shifting the lens that we can understand what structures consumer behavior.

- ❑ Social actors are interacting with others.
- ❑ Their decision-making process changes depending on the constraints that shape their actions.
- ❑ If the situation changes, constraints change and, consequently, consumption practices also change (e.g., constraints of purchasing power, supply, mobility, or energy, as in the case of floods or storms that cause power outages and threaten freezers, remote work, or the charging of electronic devices).
- ❑ Part of social and economic change is driven by unpredictable crises (cf. the concept of the “black swan”).
- ❑ Today, the future becomes the new exotic world to be explored by anthropologists.

No lens is better than another, because there are always blind spots.

- ❑ What matters is shifting the analytical lens to better grasp the blind spots of consumer and business behavior.
- ❑ Focusing the lens on the collective and on power dynamics becomes more strategic, since individuals are most often not able to resolve the new problems that emerge.
- ❑ In times of crisis, qualitative approaches make it possible to detect weak signals that statistical approaches have difficulty identifying.
- ❑ Patricia Sunderland and Rita Denny, two American professional anthropologists, will present this inductive and qualitative method of observation.
- ❑ Historically, anthropologists' expertise has consisted of navigating unfamiliar worlds without established reference points (as in studies of witchcraft in Congo in 1975 or everyday life in China in 1997).

How can we decipher consumption inductively, by focusing on practices, objects, rituals, and collective culture?

Vidéo Patti and Rita

Concluding perspective: The importance of conflict in understanding the climate/energy transition.

- ❑ The history of modern consumption, which began around the eighteenth century in England, reminds us that conflict lies at its heart.
 - These conflicts have often been driven by women.

- ❑ Energy is the foundation of the functioning of any society: first human and animal energy, then technical and industrial energy, and today the transition toward more sustainable and less energy-intensive systems.

- ❑ Throughout history, energy has been a source of conflict and warfare, whether to control:
 - human labor (slavery, workforce, migration),
 - raw materials (formerly gold, silver, copper, coal, iron; today, rare metals essential for electric vehicles, wind turbines, solar panels, microprocessors, and artificial intelligence),
 - water resources, protein sources such as soy, or military technologies such as drones.

- ❑ What may be unprecedented today is the global and geopolitical importance of consumption, which can foster cooperation as well as conflict (see Allison's work on the Thucydides Trap).

- ❑ All of this leads us to reflect on how to move toward more frugal consumption without threatening the survival of businesses, local authorities, and citizens. We likely need to innovate in the way we bring about change and in the way we innovate itself—accepting less comfort and higher-priced products. None of this is self-evident, which explains why consumption changes are inherently conflictual. Not everyone has a short-term interest in more frugal consumption.

Thank you (translated with the help of AI)