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Save energy! Save energy! Every day, everyone of us receives exhortations to reduce our energy consumption in all its forms: replace our light bulbs by low-consumption ones, isolate windows, and replace old fridges. The arguments given to reduce our consumption are well known: save the planet for future generations, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, save biodiversity, etc. These arguments are all relevant, but they are not effective.

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Energy: a Cultural Good

Electricity or gas consumption keeps on increasing: nothing changes. We should acknowledge that saving energy is not easy. At home, uninterrupted currents of energy seem to flow freely, they are just available. This flow is not always viewed as an asset, but sometimes also as a nuisance: many of us turn off the light not to save energy, but because we don't want light anymore, for instance to sleep. Occasionally there is a social burst of realization that energy is valuable (e.g. the 'Earth Hour'), but enthusiasm quickly dies away and behaviors are not durably modified. I propose here a simple argument: the main reason to save energy, electricity, gas, etc., is not to save the planet or reduce greenhouse gas emissions: these reasons are extrinsic to us. The main reason is that energy has to be taken care of, because it is a cultural good.

Commonsense (and ethnology) tells us that a 'natural object', once transformed by man, becomes de facto a cultural one. The apple on an apple tree is natural, but the compote, manufactured from apples, which were previously gathered and possibly conditioned, with sugar produced from beetroots, cinnamon imported from Madagascar and cooked with gas coming from the Ukraine through heavy infrastructures, is no longer a natural good. As a ready-cooked dish, compote enters the category of cultural goods. Even if this distinction may appear scholastic and debatable (the apple tree could itself be artificially planted, treated, modified, etc.), it pervades our commonsense ontology. And we can observe that our society devotes an increasing part of its activity to the production and preservation of its culture. Artistic objects, notably, are given all possible forms of attention: museums are built to store and exhibit them, archive centers boom. Even Internet, with its known garbage dimension, is backed up. The idea that we could lose anything produced by humans becomes increasingly unbearable. Conversely, natural resources are seen as more or less valueless.

This is the reason why we can, we must, consider energy as a cultural good. Energy engineers do it already: they distinguish so-called primary energy, like the electricity produced by a lake, wind or uranium from secondary energy, which is the result of the transformation of the former under forms that are directly usable by man, like the electricity that flows in our power sockets. These transformations are the result of a considerable amount of human knowledge, know-how, and years of scientific and technical discoveries whose ingenuity has somehow been lost in the democratization of energy. But this human facet of our daily electricity is real: electricity is to lakes, wind, uranium, fuel or coal what compote is to apples.

Thus, if we would consider these energy flows as a cultural good, could this paradigm shift stop us from spending electricity, gas, and even water like water?