The Origin of Economic Interest

Manufacturing Demand in Modern France

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# Chapter 1. The Origin of Consumer Interest

Beginning almost immediately following World War II, French consumers began to mobilize actively around issues of price, quality and product safety. The French state also began to offer legal and regulatory protections to consumers that helped to increase their voice and status relative to manufacturers and retailers. By a generation later, the consumer had been constituted fully as an interest group in society, one whose problems generated legitimate claims on the state that demanded an economic and policy response. With the new interest came new consumer rights and, in an unprecedented extension of the state into prior areas of producer autonomy, new controls on manufacturer activities related to product safety, transparency, fraud, and post-sales service. It represented a transition from a general approach characterized by the legal principal of *caveat emptor* to one of *caveat venditor*—from buyer beware to seller beware. This extension of the regulatory state to embrace consumer interests corresponded with a growing affluence in France, and paralleled the rise of similar consumer protections in other advanced industrialized countries. It accompanied the rise of a consumer society that, as in other advanced industrialized economies, eased the needs of consumers while also abetting materialism and status-driven consumption.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this sense, the history of the rise of French consumerism links economic affluence and the extension of state capacity beyond the more conventional productionist domains of labor relations or industrial policy. It offers a demand-side account of political and economic modernization, with a focus on how a new economic interest—the modern consumer interest—emerged and came to receive societal recognition.

The new consumer interest in France did not emerge fully formed. Consumer mobilization began with a set of price transparency actions in the 1950s. The legal origins of an affirmative consumer interest can be traced to the early 1960s, when new laws on price labeling (1962), truth in advertising (1963) and product quality labeling (1963) all emphasized the idea of information as a means to consumer protection. A second wave of laws in the 1970s empowered consumer associations, granting them legal rights to sue companies (1973), to set general safety norms for products (1978), and to regulate consumer contract terms (1978). The 1970s also saw the emergence of a range of negotiations between consumer associations and producers to set the terms of product quality and sales. These negotiated agreements were embraced and codified by right and left governments in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Finally, in 1983, France created its first independent consumer defense agency, the CSC, tasked with monitoring consumer product markets, and with powers to inspect producers and withdraw dangerous products from the market. More and stronger consumer protections followed, including laws in 1986 and 1993 that reinforced the provisions of the 1983 legislation. This set of regulatory transformations marked the acceptance of a fully mature consumer interest that enjoyed pervasive and legitimate claims on the state.

Why did the consumer interest, understood as a new set of societal claims, emerge when and how it did in France? The question is a variant of an old puzzle about the origins of interests. One set of theories, grounded in collective action, argues that new interests become salient in politics as their constituents mobilize to advocate for them. A second set of theories, with roots American political development, emphasizes the ways in which new extensions of benefits or rights by the state can trigger demand for those rights. Yet neither fits cleanly with the experience of French consumers. From at least the 19th Century, French consumers were concerned about issues of price, quality, safety and fraud, and those early aggrieved consumers periodically and actively organized. France also enacted a series of consumer protection policies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, intended primarily to respond to a wave of food imports enabled by new transport and storage technologies, that did *not* elicit popular demands for new consumer protections. A genuine consumer interest emerged only later in France, with early taproots in the interwar period, but then consolidating in the first three decades following World War II. This was also the moment when the French economy went through unprecedented economic growth, driven by a French state that engaged deeply in economic planning to coordinate a postwar developmental project. This timing was more than coincidental. Growing affluence seems to have been a necessary condition for the rise of consumerism across the advanced industrialized countries. But the particular trajectory of consumer interest formation we observe in France was also intimately connected to the French postwar state-building project. France’s post-World War II developmental state cultivated consumers as an independent economic actor that could serve as an ally in extending state control over the economy it sought to manage.

As World War II came to a close, a discredited and weak French state embraced planning as an economic strategy that promised to break the low-growth deadlock of the interwar years and return France to its prewar peak of 1929. As state planners seized the levers of economic control, they feared influence by industry would distort their application, and pushed for measures to promote market competition in order to discipline producers and build autonomy for the state. As a part of this project, regulators supported activist ‘expert’ consumers who could be allies in guiding its new planning tools and in enforcing market competition. They sponsored new consumer groups, encouraged consumer-retailer pacts, and used state-controlled media channels to disseminate consumer information. In doing so, French economic planners laid the foundation for a new set of consumer claims on the state that remained and were reinforced even as the statist economic project receded during the late 1970s and 1980s.

So successful was this project to build state capacity that by the 1970s, French economic policymakers felt emboldened to abandon their prior emphasis on markets and competition. By abandoning markets, however, the French state also lost a source of allocative discipline, and the economic underpinnings of the state began to erode. Ultimately, this longer-term trend led to economic vulnerability, forcing the governments first of Valerie Giscard-D’Estaing in the late-1970s and then of François Mitterrand in the mid-1980s to return to market mechanisms. This was a different kind of double movement from that which Karl Polanyi described, and it played a role in consolidating the new consumer interest. As the French state withdrew from economic planning, it sought political cover for its retreat in a new set of direct protections for individual consumers. France’s independent consumer organizations, now abandoned by the state, re-oriented their efforts from supporting national economic policy to pursuing individual consumer claims. In this sense, the French state’s recognition of a consumer interest emerged in the context of this second great transformation: forged as a support to the growing power of the state, then quenched by the processes that accompanied the state’s subsequent economic withdrawal.

The story of the origins of the French consumer interest departs from historians’ accounts that have tended to portray of French postwar consumerism as a pale and delayed mirroring of the American consumer experience.[[2]](#footnote-2) French consumers were aware of trends in American consumerist society, and French policymakers and activists were ever keen to borrow ideas and models from abroad. The Marshall Plan in particular proved an especially alluring vector for American products and consumer habits.[[3]](#footnote-3) But a closer look at the evolution of consumer politics shows that the French consumer market and interests emerged from a highly distinctive configuration of domestic political and economic forces. It also differs from processes that scholars have observed in the earlier mobilization of consumer interest in the United States and United Kingdom. Lizabeth Cohen’s account of the mid-Century rise of American consumerism traces this process to the construction of an alternative social space forged through political action by women and African-Americans who had historically been excluded from traditional political and economic discourse.[[4]](#footnote-4) Frank Trentman traces the rise of the consumer interest in England to utilities groups who protested against state water taxes, and to a state that later harnessed and reinforced the consumer interest in lower prices to build a politics of economic liberalism around a national ethos of free trade.[[5]](#footnote-5) These different national accounts of the consumer interest point to multiple potential paths of interest formation, of which the French experience represents one variation. The rise of consumerism as a cultural and economic phenomenon that was experienced across the advanced industrialized countries nonetheless followed distinctive national trajectories that were deeply embedded within each nation’s economic and political context.

## Origins of Economic Interest

How do new interests, understood as claims on the state, emerge? Political scientists have found their origins at the intersection of individual, private interests and policies intended to embody the public interest. Two dimensions of this sort of private/public interest interaction help to distinguish the main currents of new interest formation. See Figure 1. The first dimension distinguishes theories that treat individual interests as unchanging, or primordial, from those that emphasize ways in which individual interests are malleable and therefore socially or politically constructed. Because the kinds of consumer interests we are focused on, dealing with issues like price, quality, and fraud, are both old concerns that have long been a focus of French households, and also economic in their emphasis, the core of my account is not primarily concerned with the ways in which individual consumer interests are constructed. Following Helen Milner and others, I take them as fixed.[[6]](#footnote-6) The second dimension distinguishes between mechanisms that function in a ’bottom-up’ manner, in which private individual claims aggregate up to generate new public interests; and those that emphasize ‘top-down’ mechanisms, by which actions of the state generate new benefits or rights that help to mobilize or organize private individual interests around those claims. This dimension deals with how individual consumer interests are translated into public policy, and it is the most salient dimension for the emergence of the French consumer interest.

Figure 1. A Typology of the Origins of Economic Interest

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | *Origin of Individual Interests* | |
|  |  | Primordial | Constructed |
| *Origin of Claims on the State* | Top-Down | **Statist**   * Policy feedbacks (Pierson, Scokpol) * Market backlash (Polanyi) | **Constructivist**   * Identity   (Abdelal, Wendt)   * Ideas   (Goldstein, Parsons) |
| Bottom-Up | **Institutionalist**   * Mobilization   (Olson, Tarrow)   * Interest organization (Berger, Hall) | **Sociological**   * Post-industrial culture (Touraine, Bell) * Micro-sociological (Grannovetter) |

The choice to treat individual consumer interests as stable, or primordial, goes against a number of strands of research into consumer culture and politics. Sociological accounts of the rise of modern consumerism, for example, have tended to see the roots of that phenomenon as emerging from a set of bottom-up dynamics that ultimately created new kinds of individual consumer interests. Research on post-industrial culture based in the theoretical framing of sociologists like Alain Touraine and Daniel Bell emphasized the ways in which new affective sources of identity could play a role in a cultural shift that constituted new kinds of interests.[[7]](#footnote-7) These macro-sociological accounts were reinforced by subsequent research in economic sociology that emphasized how interests were shaped through micro-sociological logics rooted in norms, trust, and power. Foundational to this effort was Mark Grannovetter’s emphasis on the role of social location and networks in generating economic interest.[[8]](#footnote-8) These insights led to a renaissance within economic sociology, in which researchers traced the origins of basic economic interests to their social context.[[9]](#footnote-9) This sociological strain of research proved influential in early studies of consumer culture and politics that emphasized the ways in which national consumer practices emerged from broader societal cultures.[[10]](#footnote-10) These sociological accounts shared a view of new consumer interest creation that operated largely independent from state action.

Within political science, these sociological accounts inspired new constructivist strains of research in comparative political economy and international political economy that linked national identity to the formation of individual perceptions of economic interest.[[11]](#footnote-11) They emphasized the ways in which political leaders could push specific economic ideas or identities that then shaped support for corresponding economic policies.[[12]](#footnote-12) These constructivist mechanisms also found resonance in research on consumer policies, ranging from early Marxist ideas about “reproductive” consumption to subsequent theories linking consumer cultures to broader projects of economic development.[[13]](#footnote-13) While these top-down, constructivist ideas about new interest formation have proved powerful in explaining variation in national consumer cultures, they fit poorly with the kinds of stable preferences that consumers have expressed towards the core economic issues of price, quality and fraud that were the focus of French consumer advocates and government policy. On these core economic issues, consumers have shown extremely stable interests over time and across countries. This work nonetheless reveals a narrow link to these constructivist accounts. While consumer’s individual interests in the consumption sphere remained stable, their expectation that those interests deserved to be defended by the state changed, in part due to the kind of top-down mechanisms that the constructivist scholars have emphasized. I explore these mechanisms below.

The most prominent accounts of new interest formation in political science rely on bottom-up accounts of fixed or primordial interests. These theories include a range of mobilization theories with their roots in collective action and citizen protest, as well as accounts of new interest formation within the historical institutionalist literature. In Mancur Olson’s classic account, mobilization and citizen protest theories root their accounts of new interest formation in strategies and technologies that allow diffuse interests to overcome coordination problems. [[14]](#footnote-14) Another set of accounts of the origins of new interests emerged within the historical institutionalist tradition.[[15]](#footnote-15) Mostly these studies assumed that private interests were tied to the production process, and were stable across individuals and societies. But this productionist formulation opened the way for a range of studies of how institutions mediated interest formation, and the role of mobilization and collective action in shaping those interests. And, while the historical institutionalist research has been criticized for emphasizing continuity over change, researchers within this tradition have noted ways in which existing institutions have played a role at moments when new kinds of interests emerged, especially through creative re-configuration of existing institutions and interest coalitions.[[16]](#footnote-16) These historical institutionalist accounts share with mobilization theories the idea that underlying interests were essentially fixed, and that their embrace in public policy resulted from changes in the way in which those interests were channeled into national politics.

If the institutionalist theories emphasized bottom-up mechanisms of interest aggregation, a parallel set of theories focused on the ways in which states could act in a top-down manner to support the mobilization and voice of individual economic interests. This statist mechanism traces its intellectual origins to the Austro-Hungarian economic historian Karl Polanyi, whose lauded account in *The Great Transformation* described a dual expansion of markets and states over the late 19th and early 20th centuries that led to the formation of early labor and welfare interests.[[17]](#footnote-17) In Polanyi’s account, the new interests emerged from a double movement, in which a 19th Century move by states to embrace markets created societal evils that engendered early 20th Century demands for new government activism. A societal backlash against the negative social externalities from markets led new groups to demand greater state protections.[[18]](#footnote-18) The resulting expansion of the state’s role in regulating markets planted the seeds of new kinds of claims: both in the workplace, in the form of labor contracting and safety protections, and outside of the workplace, beginning with unemployment insurance and extending to pension and health benefits.[[19]](#footnote-19) Inspired in part by Polanyi’s work, subsequent research on policy feedbacks in American political development emphasized how the design of new benefits could help to legitimate and sustain popular support.[[20]](#footnote-20) Most attention has gone to policy feedback channels that emphasize their impact on interest organization and public engagement. Theda Skocpol shows how benefits for civil war veterans became the basis for clientelist politics that sustained support for the program—while subverting future efforts to extend such benefits.[[21]](#footnote-21) Suzanne Mettler theorizes that the fair treatment of the poor under the G.I. Bill increased their civic engagement.[[22]](#footnote-22) But elements of the feedback argument also suggest that new policies can alter individuals’ perception about the legitimate extent of state engagement in society. Andrea Campbell, for example, argues that the pay-as-you-go structure of American Social Security led recipients to see it as a legitimate claim. Conversely, the personally intrusive way in which AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children) benefits were distributed convinced its recipients that the program constituted an over-extension of the state.[[23]](#footnote-23) In this sense, the policy-feedback theories open the door to a semi-constructivist account of the processes by which individuals come to see their narrow economic interests as generating a claim on the state.

This insight is especially important for understanding the rise of postwar consumer politics in France. For French consumers, what was essential for the construction of an affirmative consumer interest was that relevant societal actors began to believe that the wants and preferences at stake were not merely private ones, grounded in narrow individual concerns, but also ones of general public relevance and responsibility. The recognition of an interest as generating a public claim of this sort depended not primarily on collective action or other forms of organization—although consumer mobilization did play an important role in the process—but instead on a broader shift in *individual* consumers’ beliefs about the state’s responsibility for concerns that they had previously blamed on acts of god or market failure. In this sense, the rise of the French consumer interest traces the shifting boundary between private and public spheres through which a set of formerly individual grievances made the journey to become matters of affirmative, and therefore societal, interest.

The polymath economist Albert Hirschman addressed the conditions under which private grievances might shift to become public responsibilities in his 1982 work *Shifting Involvements*.[[24]](#footnote-24) His account, drawing on the theoretical framing adumbrated in *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (1970), focused on the incentives for individual consumers to mobilize politically. He argued that new kinds of products, especially new services, drove profound consumer disappointments that led them to opt for political voice over market exit. Hirschman’s theory was attractive in that it offered an account of the timing of postwar consumerist politics by linking it to the growth in the service economy that accompanied postwar household affluence. But his approach is insensitive to the ways in which changing ideas about the scope of the state influenced how individual consumers interpreted their grievances as failures of public policy rather than as failures of markets. If the key challenge in creating a modern consumer interest was to convince consumers that their individual and shared plight generated legitimate claims on the French state, as Hirschman theorized, much of the impetus for that shift in attitude came from the state itself, conveyed via policies that extended both new rights and new responsibilities onto emerging consumer associations. That process relied on a combination of top-down and bottom-up strategies.

The top-down argument draws on the policy feedback arguments in American political development that have emphasized how the design of new benefits could help to legitimate and sustain popular support. Early French consumer policies induced a similar legitimating feedback process. State policymakers actively abetted consumer claims in order to impose discipline on the retail and industrial sectors they feared would usurp their control over economic policy. But bottom-up mobilization was also important. Early consumer associations, whose efforts initially targeting issues of worker protection and national economic competitiveness, served to convince activist consumers that their individual problems also justified claims on the state. The legitimacy of the early consumer groups was reinforced by incumbent economic interests—retailers, industry, labor—that opted for strategic reasons to recognize and ally with the new consumer movement. Taken together, these top-down and bottom-up mechanisms convinced French households to view retailer exploitation, poor quality products, and high prices as generating a legitimate claim on the state and society.

## From Problems to Interests

It is perhaps surprising, given the French statist tradition, that consumers should have been reticent to accept their needs as generating new claims on the state. Yet, for French consumers, three obstacles inhibited the translation of personal economic interest into an affirmative set of interests. First, consumers were inclined to see their problems as caused by markets and susceptible to market-based solutions. The goal of consumers’ early mobilizations was to make the market work *better*, rather than to draw on the regulatory capacities of the state to fix market failures. And insofar as new market actors emerged to address consumer concerns, consumers rallied to them. Second, opposition by organized labor to the mobilization of consumers helped to impede consumer action in their own interests. The earliest successful consumer movements either supported labor union goals, as in the case of the social buyers’ leagues, or were supported by unions, as with the post-World War I protests over high prices. As other interest groups in society came to see consumers as useful allies or adjacent interests, they began to promote the idea of consumers interests as having a legitimate pubic status. The third obstacle to consumers’ conceiving of their individual problems as generating collective societal claims derived from their concerns about the legitimate scope of state activity. To an extent not commonly recognized, France’s state struggled to extend its capacity and legitimacy amid persistent policy failure.

Given these obstacles, how did French consumer attitudes about the proper scope of the state change? Popular mobilization and state policy activation played important roles in this process, though not primarily as a mechanical trigger for aggregating existing individual claims. Rather, their more important role was in the ways in which they altered individual consumers’ assumptions about the about the appropriate scope of state responsibility for market failures. There was also a third causal element: the decision by incumbent interest groups, including producers, retailers, and organized labor, to recognize the new consumer interest. The interaction of these three mechanisms—consumer mobilization, state policy activation, and third-party recognition—generated the conditions under which new collective consumer claims on the state were generated. I first discuss these three drivers independently, then trace how they interacted to generate the specific trajectory by which the French consumer interest emerged.

*Consumer mobilization*. Given the diffuseness of consumers as economic actors, we might expect consumers to face challenges in mobilizing. In fact, the historical record suggest that aggrieved consumers organized surprisingly readily. At moments of consumer disgruntlement, especially driven by scarcity or high prices, marketplaces became natural focal points for collective action. Critically, though, these protests were focused on disciplining markets rather than the state. They typically led to pilfering of food and merchandise, vandalism, or, more rarely, consumer boycott, and these kinds of protest actions have a deep history in France. Louise Tilly tallies twenty major food riots in France between 1690 and 1860 – one every 9 years.[[25]](#footnote-25) That frequency continued into the early 20th century, when spikes in food prices in 1910 and 1919 led to similar food mobilizations. Yet these mobilizations did not lead to a broad set of consumer claims on the French state. Consumers protested, producers responded, and the police mostly stood aside. Formal responsibility for policing markets that had originally resided with landed nobility—along with responsibilities to provide a mill and a place of worship—were formally assigned to the French state during the French revolution. Over the 19th century, however, that responsibility was progressively decentralized through a series of court decisions so that by the early 20th century, local towns and cities bore responsibility for policing their markets. When consumers protested, it was the local market police who had to face them. In some ways the rise of the consumer interest reflected a re-nationalizaiton of responsibility for protecting markets. But the challenge to this kind of interest formation was *not* a set of logistical obstacles to mobilization, as standard collective action theory would suggest. The major obstacle was rather to convince consumers that the problems they encountered in the market were more than simply private concerns, and, as we will see, consumer mobilization did play an important role in that process.

In fact, the early sustained and national consumer movements in France succeeded when they *did not* organize specifically around consumer interests. Successful early consumer groups, including the consumer cooperative movement of the late 19th Century and the buyers’ leagues of the early 20th Century, succeeded precisely because they were organizing in favor of non-consumer interests, in particular those of workers. The history of the emergence of a distinctive consumer interest in the postwar period can be traced through the process by which consumer mobilization for the interests of *others* was transmuted into mobilization in their own interests. Central to this alchemy of interest was the role of prices and inflation. Concerns about inflation formed a bridge between national economic concerns about French competitiveness and private household concerns around the family budget. In the 1950s and 1960s, the French government worked to mobilize “expert” consumers as a bulwark against higher prices. These early consumer activists mobilized not in their own interest, but to assist in national economic policy. Even as the government pulled back from this strategy, as it began to set prices directly, consumer groups continued to emphasize the high costs of inflation, but for individual consumers. We observe a similar bridging pattern in the early consumer protests of the 1970s. The first of these began with protests against industry degradation of the environment. Their environmental critique focused on issues like water and beach pollution and that also entailed individual consumer grievance. In general, French consumers mobilized first around issues of public interest, which were then translated into claims that embodied narrower consumer self-interest.

*State policy activation*. Central to both the mobilization of consumers and to new consumer protection policies was the emergence of France’s postwar developmental state. In the wake of World War II, the French state sought to engineer rapid economic growth while having been weakened and delegitimized both by the experience of interwar economic stagnation and subsequent military conquest and occupation. To execute its productivity program, the French state needed to build its capacity for allocating technology and resources, while also protecting itself from influence peddling by France’s powerful producers who would seek to control access to those resources. As a weak state facing powerful private economic interests, France’s economic planners embraced the seemingly contradictory combination of state planning *and* strong market competition. Their idea was that markets would discipline producers, creating space for the state to act autonomously. It was from this strategy that support for “expert” consumers emerged. Consumers, informed and mobilized, would provide economic discipline. Their input into economic policymaking would help counterbalance industry influence and orient economic planning toward consumer rather than producer benefit; their careful decisions while shopping would impose genuine competition that would limit rent-seeking by industry. As consumers sought out the lowest prices for existing products and swapped to new and lower priced products that embodied higher productivity, they helped to ensure that producers making productivity-enhancing investments would be rewarded in the marketplace. A range of consumer-focused policies over the 1950s and early 1960s focused on achieving these goals.

In this way the emergence of the consumer interest was intimately tied to the evolution of France’s developmental state. As the economic role of the state evolved, so too did its role in constituting a consumer interest. In particular, success in early economic planning led to a rise in the capacity and economic legitimacy of the French state over the 1960s and early 1970s. As the state became more confident, its reliance of competition as a disciplining mechanism against industry declined and a newly powerful French state moved increasingly toward direct control of the economy. This was the peak of French *étatisme*, and it signaled a time of transition for France’s nascent consumer movement. Newfound confidence in the authority of the state meant that consumers were no longer necessary to discipline the economy. And, without a broad national economic purpose for their mobilization, France’s independent consumer movements began to reorient their actions away from national economic development goals and toward consumer concerns that were private and individual in their impact. It was in this context, in the early and mid-1970s, that consumer groups began boycotting individual firms, bringing lawsuits in cases of product-related harm, and publishing critical product exposés. And while they continued to conduct pricing campaigns, these were now focused on the plight of French families rather than on the benefits of low prices for French exports.

By the late 1970s, France’s *étatiste* project had begun to unravel. Stretched too far, policymakers opted to pull back from economic intervention in order to consolidate state authority. As French economic policymakers under Prime Minister Raymond Barre and Economics Minister Pierre Monory moved in the late 1970s to liberalize the economy, they justified their retreat in part by focusing on the practical individual grievances of consumers. Through new regulatory policies that targeted product failures, French economic policymakers deflected blame for the decline of the developmental state by emphasizing the defense of new individual consumer rights. For consumers, it was the moment when the idea of a legitimate consumer claim on the state was crystalized. If earlier developmental projects cultivated consumers for the national economic project, the end of that project was justified in part by focusing state authority on consumers’ individual concerns.

*Third-party recognition*. The third surprise of the rise of the consumer interest in France was the willingness of powerful incumbent interests to acknowledge a new interest group. Why did powerful producer, retailers and labor interests not block the rise of a new consumer movement that ultimately would put them under intense regulatory pressure? Far from blocking this emerging set of interests, these groups actively abetted them. But they did so at different times, and for three different kinds of reasons. One purpose was to create a new interest that would serve as an ally at a moment of economic stress and transition. This sort of coalition-building was especially attractive at moments of economic vulnerability, often caused by disruptive productivity shifts in their sector. We observe this dynamic first with France’s traditional retail sector, which faced modernizing pressures in the immediate postwar period. By the 1970s, French producers faced a similar set of economic disruptions, driven in part by pricing pressure from large-scale modern retailers. In their moments of economic vulnerability, both retailers and producers reached out to and helped to legitimize consumer associations.

The second driver that led existing interest groups to support consumer groups was the desire to extend their organizational mandates by attempting to join and influence an emerging new area of policy activity. France’s existing family and women’s groups moved early to support the consumer cause in part because they saw an opening for greater mobilization and new dimensions of policy activism. This dynamic was also a driver for France’s large labor unions, which long opposed the consumer movement, but ultimately came to see it as a new field of labor mobilization where they could expand their influence. Finally, a third reason for existing powerful groups to embrace the emerging consumer interest was the bulwark that they offered against direct regulatory extension by the state. If strong consumer groups could be made to be seen as an effective counterbalance against the existing economic power of producers and retailers, then regulators could step back to allow grievances to be managed through bargains engaged outside of the scope of the state.

## Consumers and National Competitiveness

France’s planning bureaucrats began to turn their attention to the role of consumption in France’s postwar political economy in the context of economic reconstruction. As French technocrats under the leadership of Jean Monnet contemplated applying state planning to rationalize the French economy and to engineer rapid postwar economic growth, their plans ran up against the reality that the French state, as it emerged from the war, had been deeply discredited. And because the state was weak, especially relative to a range of industries that had survived the war relatively unscathed, policymakers feared that any control it exercised over economic policy was likely to be captured by producers who would use the levers of state control to divide the market and stifle competition. This created a policy dilemma for the early planners: the more the state engaged in economic planning, the more it risked losing policy discretion to the influence of industry. Increasing state economic capacity came at the direct cost of lost policy autonomy. Their solution was to embrace markets, and market competition, and to focus on the interest and welfare of end consumers as a means of enforcing market discipline. This strategy, conceived and advocated especially by Monnet’s close advisor, economist Alfred Sauvy, imagined that consumers would play both an economic and a political role. Economically, “expert” consumers would ensure genuine competition through their informed purchasing decisions. Politically, government economic policies would be oriented toward consumer interests as the end goal of planning, and consumers would be given a voice in policy that would help to offset the distorting interests of producers and distributors.

One implication of this set of policies was that the consumer voice would have to be consolidated. The economics ministry and its office on productivity founded and funded a dedicated consumer association, the Federal Consumption Union (UFC), under the leadership of André Romieu, that brought together a range of interest groups that had a stake in decisions about consumption. A second implication of this consumer-focused planning project was that consumers themselves would play a role in regulating the economy, and this meant that the “quality” of consumption was important. Consumers would have to be educated, and the UFC quickly became a channel not just for consumers to influence government policy, but also for the dissemination of information to consumers so that they might purchase more wisely. A third implication of this policy was the critical role of retailers in linking consumers and producers. If that linkage was not working efficiently, then consumers could not play a useful economic disciplining function. But new fiscal policies designed to consolidate and modernize retail were perceived by France’s independent shopkeepers as an existential threat. Feeling vulnerable and economically strained, those retailers began to recognize and work with local consumer groups to build trust and political support. In local communities around France, new retailer-consumer liaisons emerged to track and publicize product prices, manage consumer complaints, and assist retailers in modernizing their businesses.

A spike in inflation in 1958, accompanied by growing trade deficits, plus the 1957 Treaty of Rome and subsequent progress toward a common market with Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries, placed a new emphasis on the need to hold down prices in order to improve French competitiveness. In the late 1950s, France’s finance minister, Antoine Pinay, imposed a set of fiscal austerity measures to fight inflation.[[26]](#footnote-26) And, in 1959, President De Gaulle convened a committee to recommend measures to sustain economic growth headed by economists Jacques Reuff and Louis Armand, to which Alfred Sauvy also contributed. The Reuff-Armond report pushed for strong markets through a range of policies including strong competition, liberal access to the professions, reduced state aid to firms, and free competition. It also emphasized the role of consumers in encouraging competition and recommended a more direct state intervention to inform and support them.[[27]](#footnote-27) The report launched a renewed period of institution building in which the French Economics Ministry took on core functions intended to provide consumers with adequate information to play a disciplining role in the market. In 1960, secretary of state Joseph Fontanet created a new inter-ministerial body called the National Consumption Council (CNC) to coordinate consumer-related activities. That body then oversaw an extensive program of radio and TV broadcasts—including an elaborate food price tracking report called the Consumer Telex—intended to inform consumers about product quality and prices. The government also launched a system of state-sponsored retailer-consumer pacts called the *Professionels Pilotes* through which participating retailers committed to selling certain items at favorable prices.

Because most expertise on consumer prices and policy resided still with France’s nascent independent consumer groups, the state drew them in as collaborators in each of these projects. And, as the state and retailers increasingly began working with France’s new consumer groups, those groups drew a new legitimacy, and some additional funding, from them. The focus of these policies was almost exclusively on prices and inflation—rather than product quality or safety—and that emphasis proved important for creating the new consumer interest. First, price increases could be blamed on retailers, who were already embattled, and this emphasis was less threatening to industry than a focus on product quality or safety proved to be. Second, the government emphasized that fighting inflation was critical to national economic competitiveness. Many of the women who participated in these early consumer projects did so because they saw it as a contribution to national economic goals. But pricing was also a daily household concern, affecting the family budget and their purchasing decisions. Inflation fighting thus served a bridging function: by focusing on the national economic implications of rising prices, consumer policy makers were also dealing with an issue of individual concern and frequent grievance. By the mid-1970s, as the state moved to direct regulation of prices—and hence no longer relied on consumers to discipline prices—France’s independent consumer groups continued their pricing information campaigns but shifted their emphasis from national economic performance to individual consumer welfare.

While the French state engaged actively in supporting pricing data for consumers, they also tried, and failed, to create a system of quality indications for products. The failure in setting quality standards was not due to lack of interest. Especially as the Common Market was becoming a reality, in the early 1960s, French policymakers in the Economics Ministry worried that French products were not of sufficient quality to make them attractive as exports. Using product pricing policies as a template, they pioneered a series of initiatives to harness consumer choice as a means to pressure producers to increase quality. These efforts succeeded in the agricultural sector, for which an elaborate scheme of local appellations, overseen by regional committees that set common quality standards, led to a rapid upgrading of the quality of French foods. For all other products, however, repeated attempts to deploy product quality labeling schemes that would encourage consumers to buy based on quality failed. The explanation for this failure of France’s quality initiatives lay mostly with French industry, which through the 1950s and mid-1960s remained relatively powerful before the still-weak French state and opposed state-led product quality efforts. This contrasts with France’s pricing campaigns, which were erected as a discipline for inefficient retailers and hence targeted a set of economic actors that were relatively weak and already under severe economic strain. France’s industrial leaders proved to be a more powerful group and more strategic in their response. Even as France’s peak industry association, the CNPF, signed agreements on quality labeling and other quality indications—seemingly acceding to government demands for quality—individual producers rebuffed the new projects.

## The Rise of Individual Claims

By the early 1970s, as the European project was consolidating, the domestic landscape for France’s independent consumer movements also began to shift. Whereas the early postwar planning state was administratively vulnerable, and built up the idea of an independent consumer interest to counter claims by retailers and industry, by the 1960s France’s bureaucrats had consolidated regulatory authority. France had built a strong state that it felt could stand up to private economic interests – although that assessment proved to be overly optimistic. Faced with the inflation that accompanied the 1973 oil shock, for example, the economics ministry under the right-center government of Valerie Giscard-D’Estaing began directly regulating prices. Rather than abandon the consumer interest, regulators used it as a justification to extend direct regulation over producers. And, beginning in 1976, France’s first secretary of state for consumption, Christiane Scrivener, extended state control to a range of projects that would deploy state regulators to protect consumers. She implemented new product safety standards that allowed inspectors to make unannounced inspections. And, for the first time, the government could mandate that any product be removed from the market based on safety concern. She also created a customer complaint service, called *Boîte Postale 5000*, that funneled individual complaints to bureaucratic agencies that would work with retailers and producers to resolve the issues. These moves represented an important turning point, as the government embraced the idea of a consumer interest that was distinct from broader economic performance goals. Individual consumer grievances offered sufficient grounds for state regulatory intervention in the formerly private sphere of consumer sales.

Although these moves defended a new individual consumer interest, France’s independent consumer groups did not rejoice, as they felt that their traditional role was being displaced. They responded in two ways. First, they began cultivating local consumer unions that could interact directly with retailers and businesses. These led to a range of price survey operations, consumer boycotts, and consumer consultations. Second, they began a set of more confrontational investigations into specific product failures that they then publicized in their own publications and in the general press. And, in this one area, they received an important support from the French legislature. Beginning in 1970, France’s retailers began mobilizing again against the state for tax policies they perceived as designed to drive many of them out of business in the interest of retail modernization. Ultimately, the French state was not as insulated from private economic influence as it thought, and France’s retailers, under the leadership of Gerard Nicoud, were able to secure protections against large retailing via the 1973 *Loi Royer*. The retail restrictions represented a loss for France’s consumer groups, who favored modern retailing for its lower prices and greater convenience. Partly as compensation for this loss, and partly to impose new discipline on retailers, the Loi Royer included a provision allowing France’s national consumer associations to file legal suits against companies that hurt consumers through misleading advertising or other criminal infractions. With this new legal status, France’s consumer groups launched a barrage of lawsuits against individual retailers and producers over misleading advertising, faulty sales terms and failures of product safety. These actions helped to bring publicity to the groups, which in turn reinforced their efforts to mobilize local consumer unions.

This also marked the moment when industry began to embrace consumers as a legitimate interest in their own right. As consumer groups became more aggressive in their approach to business, retailers and industry responded by reaching out to consumer groups to negotiate agreements that would stipulate acceptable conditions of sales and product characteristics. They did so partly because they saw consumers as an enduring economic and political force, but also partly because they thought voluntary agreements with consumer associations would hold back the regulatory extension of the state. In doing so, they laid the groundwork for the state to begin its withdrawal from direct control over markets.

By the late 1970s, France’s attempts to directly manage the economy had reached a breaking point. Beginning in 1978, Giscard Destaing and his new economics minister Pierre Monory executed a policy reversal that began a radical deregulation of the French economy. The first step was to be price deregulation. To ensure that industry did not take advantage of the new pricing freedom to exploit consumers, Monory quadrupled state funding to France’s independent consumer groups and encouraged them to sign new agreements with industry. The CNPF, France’s peak industry association, invited all of France’s consumer groups to join a monthly forum in which new agreements could be worked out.

The victory of the Socialist government of François Mitterrand in 1980 reversed Monory’s deregulatory project, if only for a short time. Mitterrand nationalized private firms and imposed a freeze on all prices. But he also maintained Monory’s project of encouraging direct negotiations between consumers and producers that would result in agreements that would constrain industry and retail practice. To oversee this process, Mitterrand appointed France’s first Minister of Consumption, Catherine Lalumière, who set about rewriting France’s legal framework of consumer law to give a formal status to contractual conventions signed between consumers and firms. By 1983, however, economic crisis laid waste to these plans. Mitterrand’s policy U-turn, and embrace of privatizations and markets, led to a recapitulation of the deregulatory strategy under Monory: consumers would be encouraged to negotiate with firms, while the state pulled back from market intervention and directed its regulation to focus more narrowly on consumer protections against product-related injury. In this way, on both the political left and right, the French state, industry, and consumer groups converged on the idea of a consumer interest focused on individual injury and largely divorced from national economic policymaking.

## Agent-Centered Institutionalism

This account of the emergence of a consumer interest in France traces the actions of three kinds of actors—consumer organizations, state policymakers, and incumbent economic interests—as they came to terms with a new set of consumer interests that they embraced and helped to shape for their own strategic purposes. A range of state and economic institutions lay at the center of these interactions, but the role of those institutions proved to be more contingent than has typically been emphasized in traditional institutionalist accounts, and that contingency breaks with the tendancy toward path dependency that has been a hallmark of institutionalist analysis. The impact of path depencency was limited, for two reasons. First, the interactions among the state, consumer groups and incumbent interests created a sort of three-body problem, in which the outcomes were deterministic, but also heavily dependent on the details of how the different agents interacted. Second, while institutions mattered in the construction of the French consumer interest, so too did the decisions and actions of economic and policy entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs enjoyed genuine policy discretion. Hence, while methodologically rooted in institutionalism, this account emphasizes an agent-centered variant of that approach that requires a methodological note.

The institutionalist turn in political science and economic sociology offered powerful leverage in explaining cross-national differences that persisted despite common pressures of liberalization and globalization. Critics noted institutionalism’s seeming methodological bias toward stability, especially as applied to the postwar period when national policies across the economic and social spectrum were in dramatic transformation and upheaval.[[28]](#footnote-28) Scholars who have worked to address this concern within the institutionalist framework have proposed theoretical emendations that explore a range of institutionalist channels for explaining policy change.[[29]](#footnote-29) Yet even the flexibility of these more sophisticated institutionalist models fall short of the task of explaining how entirely new interests emerge.

One problem is that new interests frequently emerge at similar times across a range of countries at similar stages of economic development. But, because the institutionalist tools have led scholars to focus on accounts of comparative national difference, they have tended to look away from even major policy transformations that have occurred in parallel across the advanced industrialized countries. As often as comparative case studies have been elucidating, they can in the case of new interest formation succumb to the narcissism of small differences. Much institutionalist analysis also suffers from a survivorship bias that leads its practitioners to perceive institutions as being more deterministic than they reveal themselves in practice. This effect is especially prominent at moments of new institution creation, and is often accentuated by a lack of sufficiently detailed historical sources to detect cycles of rapid institutional experimentation and failure that have tended to accompany the formation of new interests. By only observing those institutions that survive the formative cycle of creation, experimentation, and destruction, researchers have tended to over-emphasize the causal weight of the institutions that ultimately survived, and to miss the alternative institutional paths that might also have emerged. Finally, the institutional turn in political science and economic sociology has tended to understate the importance of political agency, outside of uncommon moments of dramatic contingency that have been characterized as critical junctures.[[30]](#footnote-30) In particular, institutionalist accounts of normal politics have emphasized the arms-length coordination of different economic actors operating in moderately stable equilibrium at the cost of attention to the role of more active coalition building that may characterize an instance of new interest formation.

Together, these three kinds of limitations have created a bias toward equilibrium that has tended to understate the role of experimentation and creative agency in the political process. While these limitations have been muted in their impact on the analysis of existing interests, they make institutionist analysis less well suited to explaining periods of new interest formation. This project uses the tools of historical institutionalism to explain the rise of a new economic interest by placing greater emphasis on the kinds of political and economic agency that conventional institutionalist analysis has tended to obscure. What are the elements of this agent-centered institutionalism? The first step is to pay closer attention to institutional failure. At moments of institutional innovation, far more institutions typically fail than survive, and those failures deserve our attention. They can teach us about the conditions under which successful institutions were able to survive, and about the kinds of coalitions that might have been possible. But examining failure is also challenging, as it requires detailed attention to institutions and policy entrepreneurs who, because they ultimately failed, have not traditionally been the focus of political analysis.

A second element of an agent-centered institutionalism requires that we see institutions as more flexible and ambiguous than we we conventionally have. What made institutions politically powerful at the moment of new interest formation was not that they defined clear rules of the game, but rather that they were, often intentionally, ambiguous in their distributive implications. Their lack of clarity—the ability of an institution to mean one thing to one set of actors and another thing to others—allowed them to become a productive forum in which new political deals could be negotiated. France’s new consumer institutions were often designed specifically to be unclear and even contradictory, verging on non-functional, in order to encompass competing ideas and interests. This implies that we should treat new institutions not always as the end of a political process, but sometimes as a stage of, or in some cases the very beginning of, a process of political innovation.

The need for flexibility in the interpretation of new institutions places a special emphasis on the role of institutional borrowing. Many innovations elaborated in France were imported from the United States. These include social buyer’s leagues, comparative product testing, strict product liability, and the idea of a Nader-inspired personal antagonist to industry. Others came from other European countries. France’s local consumer groups of the early 1970s were copied from Britain; its office of the Médiateur (1973) was cribbed from the Office of the Consumer Ombudsman in the Scandinavian countries; its evolving product labeling schemes were borrowed mostly from Sweden; its system of regulating product testing came from Germany. In each case, the foreign source for these innovations was always explicit, testifying to the fact that such an idea was feasible. In each case, however, the borrowed institution was also subject to indigenous reform, and primarily for political reasons.[[31]](#footnote-31) What different domestic actors saw in the foreign model was usually different, and this ambiguity became coalitional fodder for policy entrepreneurs.

The third salient feature of an agent-centered institutionalism is the role of the state—embodied in this case in economic policymakers working mostly within the economics ministry—as an independent driver of economic outcomes. The process by which consumers mobilized, and by which other groups recognized them as legitimate, was fundamentally conditioned by the expansion and retreat of France’s developmental state. In broad terms, consumer interests that were created by the state to support its early developmental project later became a tool by which it sold economic deregulation as a further governmental success. In the first instance, consumer interests helped to discipline economic actors—retailers and producers—that threatened to impede the state’s developmental goals. Consumer interests gave the state the autonomy it needed to build its regulatory and planning capacity. With the withdrawal of the state, beginning in the mid-1970s, consumer interests became a tool for the state to harness the power of the market itself to generate superior economic outcomes. And, since the state had retreated from commitments to national economic competitiveness, the focus of consumer policy shifted from national goals to individual claims. In this sense, a focus on agent-centered institutionalism contributes to a broader project to bring the state back into institutional analysis.

## Structure of the Book

The six empirical chapters of the book trace the emergence of the consumer interest in France from its pre-World War II roots through the strong statist protection policies that began to be implemented in the mid-1980s. The book is organized around the expansion and retreat of the French planning state. Chapters 3 and 4 trace the parallel rise of French state economic policy and its embrace of a new consumer interest that it perceived as supporting the autonomy of the state as it took on new levers of economic control. Chapters 6 and 7 trace the over-extention and subsequent economic withdrawal of France’s planning state, as it first abandoned the idea of consumers as a partner in economic development, and then embraced consumers as a rearguard action as it pulled back from guiding economic policy. Finally, Chapters 2 and 5 offer a set of tests of the core argument of the book—that the new consumer interest emerged through a process by which consumers came to see their own problems as generating a legitimate set of claims on the state. They address the failure to forge a consumer interest in the period prior to World War II (Chapter 2), and at the level of European consumer policy (Chapter 5). I briefly outline the argument of the chapters in chronological order.

Chapter 2 asks why the consumer interest did not emerge in the pre-World War II period, a moment when consumers were both organized and periodically unhappy with their consumption experience. The missing ingredients here were the lack of state engagement with consumers, and the absence of recognigition by incumbent economic interests of the consumers as a legitimate new interest. But this pre-war period also foresaw some the drivers of the new postwar consumer interests. First, the successful interwar consumer movements mobilized around issues of national economic policy rather than in their own self-interest. Only much later, in the late 1960s, did they re-orient their efforts toward individual consumer grievances. Second, there were already signs in the prewar period of the reasons for retailers and even labor to embrace the idea of an independent consumer interest, even if their support did not consolidate until after World War II. Third, we see evidence that consumers failed to organize around their own self-interest due not to a failure in mobilization, but because they did not see their own personal interests as generating a claim on the state. French consumers saw their disappointments as emerging from failures of the market, and they tended to embrace market solutions to those failures.

Chapter 3 locates the origin of a consumer-oriented economic policy in the thinking of three postwar French economic actors who, while operating at the edges of Jean Monnet’s economic planning apparatus, nonetheless proved influential in forging a set of theories that would guide the new consumer interest. The first of these was Alfred Sauvy, economist and demographer and close advisor to Monnet, who emphasized the risk that the tools of economic planning could be hijacked by producer interests and used to stifle output in order to push up prices and profitability. The solution, he argued, was to place consumers at the center of the planning project. This would have two advantages: consumer input into policymaking would counter the *neo-Malthusian* influence of producers, while wise consumer purchases would enforce competition that would limit the ability of producers to collude around higher prices. The second advocate for a consumer interest was Jean Fourrastier, head of France’s productivity office, who worried whether increased productivity in manufacturing would be met by a similar modernization of consumption. This concern led him to emphasize technologies like refrigeration and mass consumer credit, but also better mechanization of the kitchen and improved consumer information. The third advocate of the consumer interest, André Romieu, became the head of France’s first state-sponsored consumer association, the Federal Consumers Union (UFC). Romieu’s cooperative vision of the economy saw consumers as moderating conflicts between labor and capital, while also helping to shape government policies in ways that benefited consumers. Together, these three actors helped to launch the idea that the French state, as it extended its economic reach, also needed to embrace consumers as an economic ally that would support the state-led industrialization project.

Chapter 4 traces the expansion of French state control over the consumer interest during the 1960s through a set of policies intended to inform and protect consumers as they shopped. Most of these policies were based on informal experiments launched by independent consumer groups that were then nationalized in support of France’s economic planning apparatus. These included a new inter-ministerial National Consumption Council (CNC) tasked with giving policy input on consumption issues, and a set of public broadcasts controlled by the CNC that distributed pricing information and purchasing advice to consumers over the radio and television. Another set of policies worked to support retail modernization, including incentives to modernize and a set of consumer-friendly retailing schemes intended to hold down prices on popular goods. These policies focused on price linked individual consumer interests in lower prices with a growing national economic concern about competitiveness in context of rising inflation. France’s independent consumer groups, which mobilized to support these efforts, also understood their support as contributing to a national economic project. Finally, the chapter addresses a set of projects to improve product quality in France, and evaluates the reasons for their failure. The core problem was that while pricing policy mostly implicated retailers, who were in an economically weak position, new programs to increase product quality targeted producers directly, and France’s producers, still economically and politically strong, subverted their efforts.

Chapter 5 asks a similar set of questions about the rise of consumer regulation at the level of the European Commission. Between 1965 and the introduction of mutual recognition with the Cassis de Dijon case of 1982, product regulation and food pricing were in principle both relocated from French economic policymaking to technical committees within the European Commission in Brussels. Standard theories of interest formation would predict as a response the emergence of a new politics of consumer interest at the European level. Yet this did not occur. We can trace the failure of a European consumer interest to the lack of support by the European Commission for a set of actors that could help to legitimate its new regulatory authority. But the European project also helped to re-orient France’s most dynamic domestic consumer groups toward both European-level and local market actions—thereby reducing their emphasis on national-level policy. This experience began the process by which independent consumer associations shifted policy emphasis from supporting national economic project to defending individual consumer rights.

Chapters 6 describes the period in the early 1970s when French indicative planning reached its peak, and, amid a sense of virtually unbounded regulatory authority, French planners renounced their reliance on consumers as an economic ally. France’s independent consumer associations responded by re-orienting toward local actions that targeted specific cases of producer or retailer malfeasance. They published exposés of defective products, and launched retaliatory buyer boycotts against retailers who shut their doors in protest against producers. Counter-intuitively, both French workers and producers responded to this new aggressiveness by embracing the consumer interest. Workers saw that consumer boycotts might help to reinforce their worker mobilizations; producers saw negotiations with France’s independent consumer groups as a means to forestall greater economic regulation by an emboldened state. And, as France’s producers began to feel vulnerable to the newly emboldened planners, French retailers mobilized to push back against policies intended to modernize their sector. This episode offers a preview of the way in which French economic authorities responded to policy retrenchment: while the 1973 Loi Royer granted independent retailers protection against new modern retailers, it also granted consumer groups tools to directly assail retailers and producers for breaches in advertising and other regulations. Policy retrenchment on retail modernization triggered a new consolidation of individual consumer protections.

The final empirical chapter, Chapter 7, traces the evolution of consumer politics during the decade from 1976-1985, as the French state began to disengage from economic planning. As first Giscard-Destaing, in the late-1970s, and then Francois Mitterrand, in the early 1980s, moved to embrace economic liberalism, they also shifted their stance with respect to consumer protection. The result was a double movement, in which the state pulled back from economic planning, while moving to defend individual consumer rights. The chapter traces three distinct periods, and their accompanying approaches to consumer protection. From 1976 to 1978, under the first government of Raymond Barre, France’s new secretary of state for consumption, Christian Scricener, moved to impose greater direct state protections for consumers. In doing so, she displaced France’s independent consumer groups from their traditional support role, and those groups responded by taking up more aggressive direct confrontations with industry. Barre’s third governent, from 1979-1981, dramatically changed tack. In what amounted to a move to strategic disengagement, Barre’s economics minister René Monory pulled back from direct state protection of consumers, and instead encouraged France’s consumer associations to negotiate terms directly with producers. In the third and final stage, under the Socialist presidency of Francois Mitterrand, France’s new Minister of Consumption, Catherine Lalumiere, pursued a strategy of strategic engagement with organized consumers. Like Monory, she encouraged producer-consumer negotiations, but also pushed for powers to enforce those regulations. When, in 1983, capital flight forced Mitterrand to abandon his statist economic policies and embrace liberalization, he accompanied these with strong new state administrative capacities to protect individual consumers. Consumer protection became a rear-guard action as the state drew down its aspirations for guiding France’s economic development.

# 3. Apostles of Demand

The rapid growth in mass production that followed World War II elicited a range of anxieties about French consumption. Would the French find sufficient appetite to consume the new volume of products that was being produced? Would they adjust their tastes to meet the large runs of standardized products demanded by Fordist manufacturing? Would retailers allow the cost savings from new industrial investments to be passed on and enjoyed by consumers? If planning allowed rapid and rational capital allocation toward new technologies in crucial sectors, what set of policies would ensure that consumers would keep up with the new frontiers of production? This chapter focuses on the role of three French technocrats—Alfred Sauvy, André Romieu, and Jean Fourastier—who imagined how consumers might be made to support the new economic planning state. All three operated at the periphery of French planning. But their ideas about modern consumption helped to shape France’s nascent consumer movement and the way the state’s economic regulators responded to it. Taken together, their theories and projects launched the idea that a successful economic recovery required that the state address issues of modern consumption and that consumers’ actions as buyers were critical to national economic performance.

Even as World War II was raging on, plans for rebuilding after the war already contemplated the role of consumption in an economy managed through economic planning. The Courtin Report, drafted by the expatriate French resistance led by Charles de Gaulle as a template for postwar reconstruction, emphasized the inefficiencies of the retail sector, the challenges it would pose for competition and rationalization, and the need to promote large format retailing like the *prix uniques.[[32]](#footnote-32)* Economist and demographer Alfred Sauvy came to a similar conclusion. Sauvy had been part of the pre-war X-Crise group that collected and analyized French macroecononic data during the 1930s—he helped to invent what the French call *conjuncture*—and when he applied his theories of *conjuncture* to the period of German occupation, he concluded (implausibly, but he was working for Vichy) that France’s principle economic challenge under economic planning came from inefficient retail. “An excess of distribution has created a general penury that little by little infects all sectors.” This, he argued, led producers to hold down supply.[[33]](#footnote-33) Another work of postwar planning addressed the role of consumers explicitly. This was a manuscript circulated within occupied France by the lawyer Georges Blanc, and that was published in 1945 as *Economic Organization and the Consumer: Free Consumption or Guided Consumption?* In it, Blanc raised the seeming contradiction of marrying economic planning to France’s tradition of individual liberties.[[34]](#footnote-34) His argument, which proved prescient for the reconstruction period of the 1950s, was that a *dirigiste* economic policy would require an organization of consumption that relied not on direct state guidance, but on a strong coordination of consumption by independent consumer associations. “Even in a guided economy, the initiative of certain organized consumers…can be extremely fecund and offer considerable support to public authority.”[[35]](#footnote-35) A strong state, in this formulation, implied a strong but independent consumer organization.

With the end of the war, however, consideration of the role of consumers in France’s economic recovery was pushed to the edges of the state’s planning apparatus. The main roadmap for recovery was the Plan Monnet, financed out of the *Fonds de modernisation de l’équipement*, and guided by a tiny cadre of hand-picked technocrats within the *Commissariat general du plan*.[[36]](#footnote-36) Relying on direct government allocation of funds and technology to key sectors, the economy grew rapidly, while also generating large trade deficits and massive foreign exchange financing needs. Short-staffed and burdened with intensive negotiations with France’s key ministries, Monnet’s planning staff paid little heed to concerns about consumption. Consumers were invited into the planning process first in 1962, as part of the Fourth Plan, but only to provide witness on questions about retail modernization. The Sixth Plan included a working group on consumer-producer negotiations, but France’s new national consumer groups mostly boycotted it.

The important early work on consumption took place in the 1950s within France’s new Commissariat General de la Productivité (CGP) that was formed in 1948 to help upgrade the technical expertise of France’s private sector firms. The agency, with joint financing from France and the United States, sponsored learning tours to the United States in which an estimated 4,000 French industry leaders participated.[[37]](#footnote-37) Less noticed, the CGP sponsored a series of working groups on topics related to productivity, and it was this policy arena that provided a home to two of France’s important early thinkers about consumption: Jean Fourrastier and André Romieu. Fourrastier, who had trained at Sciences Po and worked in insurance regulation prior to and during World War II, led the productivity research group. As the French economy boomed, he began to worry whether what he described as “consumer productivity” would be able to keep up. [[38]](#footnote-38) If it did not, then industrial investment could be expected to slow. As he explained: “The move to mass production, requiring major investment…, must be mirrored by a coherent organization of consumption.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Fourastier saw pro-consumer policies as discernable a part of the broader productivity-regime. His proposals focused on market solutions, including greater competition in retailing, as well as a rationalization of home economics to encourage households to consume “productively.”

Within the CGP, Fourastier formed a study group focused on consumption, where André Romieu found a home. Romieu, a lawyer by training who like Fourastier had been a Vichy bureaucrat, used this position to launch France’s first truly national consumer federation, the Federal Consumers Union (UFC). For Romieu, the whole point of economic planning was to increase consumption. “A production program,” he explained, “is nothing other than a provisional program of consumption.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Romieu’s ideas for the UFC built on Fourastier’s concern about the demands of consumption under new mass production technologies. He noted that increased mechanization, with its emphasis on heavy capital equipment, longer planning cycles and longer production runs, tended to create *more* tensions between producers and their consumers, who Romieu felt were interested in “diversity, mobility, and the ability *not* to buy.” To find a “synthesis between these antagonisms,” he advocated an organized consumer base. [[41]](#footnote-41) Borrowing ideas from pre-war consumer advocates and his own experience during the war, he argued consumers should become a third power in society that could negotiate policies on a par with producers and workers. If Fourastier and Romieu shared a similar analysis of the problem of modern consumption, their solutions were very different. While Fourastier was a consummate bureaucrat, Romieu was a man of action. Their different visions—Fourastier’s state-led consumerism versus Romieu’s consumer self-empowerment—set the basic organizational tension in French postwar consumer policy.

The third French voice on postwar consumer issues did not have any formal role in the French postwar bureaucracy. Alfred Sauvy was a graduate of the Ecole Polytechnique and alumnus of the X-Crise project (the letter X was an informal designate for *polytechniciens*) and had worked with Fourastier in the statistical offices of Vichy. His primary interest was in demographics, and he went on to found and lead the French Demographic Society, where his work on economic development led him to, among other achievements, coin the term “third world.” In the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, he was a close confidante and advisor to Jean Monnet, as well as a prolific public intellectual who wrote regularly on the economic and demographic challenges of the French recovery. Sauvy saw no reason to worry about French consumption rising to meet its higher output levels, but worried deeply about those critics of economic planning who *were* worried about inadequate consumption. These included men like Maurice Allais, who argued that France could never emulate rapid American growth due to its stagnant population. Allais warned that the Marshall Plan funds would be “a shot of morphine in an otherwise sick body,” unless it accompanied expanded markets in Europe.[[42]](#footnote-42) Sauvy, who also supported the European market project, nonetheless vehemently disagreed with Allais’s diagnosis of demography as economic destiny. If France was to break from its 19th and early 20th century trajectory of underwhelming growth, Sauvy warned, it could not be allowed to repeat the mistakes of those earlier eras. And its primary mistake was to allow coordination by producers determined to hold down output in order to drive higher prices and profits. The key to growth, then, was to focus economic influence away from France’s powerful producers, and he saw a new emphasis on consumer interests as a means to break with the past.

## Alfred Sauvy and the Anxiety of Demand

Sauvy’s concerns about postwar “neo-Malthusian” forces had its roots in a 19th Century debate over the possibility of consumption to rise adequately to meet the new production possibilities of industrial technology. In England, the economic autodidact Thomas Malthus took the pessimistic view that it could not. He predicted that, as new investments in production raised industrial output, returns on those investments would fall with falling prices associated with over-supply. In Malthus’ words, “an inordinate passion for accumulation must inevitably lead to a supply of commodities beyond what the structure and habits of … society will permit to be profitably consumed.”[[43]](#footnote-43) His argument echoed that of the Italian alarmist Sismondi, who predicted that all of Europe was “arrived at a point to have, in all its parts, an industry and a manufacture superior to its wants.”[[44]](#footnote-44) His French epistolary counterpart, Jean-Baptiste Say, who in 1821 became France’s first chaired professor in economics, countered that a “general glut” of this kinds was not conceptually possible, since all production created income that would be spent.[[45]](#footnote-45) In Say’s formulation, “No one sells but with the intention of buying some other production.”[[46]](#footnote-46) His insight has been captured in the modern dictum that supply creates its own demand.[[47]](#footnote-47)

For Sauvy, however, the problem was not Malthus but his French disciples, the so-called neo-Malthusians who became influential in the wake of the Great Depression. In England, Keynes had won out over Malthus. He diagnosed the problem of the Great Depression as merely a short-term lack of demand, in response to which he prescribed debt-financed government spending. While his argument has been interpreted as a critique of Say, Keynes embraced Say’s idea that there *could be* adequate demand if consumers could be encouraged to spend.[[48]](#footnote-48) For Keynes, the problem of the Great Depression was a problem of short-term excess savings, not of long-term consumer demand. But Malthus proved to be more of a prophet in France. His French intellectual followers, the neo-Malthusians, asserted that the underlying problem of the Great Depression was a long-term imbalance created by a generalized glut in production. Under-consumption was not a short-term problem, but a structural feature of liberal economies. The solution was not to stimulate demand, but instead to coordinate a general restriction in production.

France’s experience with the Great Depression was somewhat delayed and less acute than that experienced in the United States. Economic contraction began only in 1931, and reached its peak in 1936, with GDP down 28% and an estimated 1 million workers left unemployed. France’s initial response to the Great Depression was a project of economic liberalization. French intellectuals on the left and right concluded that it had been statist intervention in the economy that had kept production from falling even as demand dropped.[[49]](#footnote-49) With liberalization, they expected prices to fall, to which consumers would respond with heightened demand. In the words of Frank Dobbin, France in the early 1930s “replaced *étatisme* with liberalism.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Yet, as France continued to lag economically even as other countries recovered from the depression, this liberal experiment came under attack by the neo-Malthusians. In their interpretation, it was *liberal* economic policies that had over the course of the 1920s allowed output to exceed the ability of consumption to absorb it. That excess output in turn led to deflation, which stalled demand.[[51]](#footnote-51) Alice Buttner, writing in 1936, pointed to the resulting paradox: “overabundance in the markets and indigence a home.”[[52]](#footnote-52) The answer, for the neo-Malthusians, was a coordinated reduction in output that would raise prices and profitability. Industrialists in sectors ranging from steel, coal, cloth, and chemicals coordinated to restrict production.[[53]](#footnote-53) New farm policies worked to limit yields, new entrants in retailing were thwarted, and trade unions negotiated work-time reductions. In what François Crouzet has described as a “growth-restricting alliance between the upper class and the peasantry,” organized economic actors agreed to limit new investments and restrict output in order to increase prices and capture rents.[[54]](#footnote-54) For Sauvy and France’s postwar technocratic planners, who had high aspirations for rapid state-led economic recovery and growth, the prospect of a neo-Malthusian restriction of output in order to raise prices had to be confronted and defeated. The problem was that the more they asserted control over the primary sectors of the economy, as both De Gaulle and Monnet intended, they more susceptible those levers of control would be to capture by industry.

Sauvy’s idea to respond to this threat was to construct a new, if abstract, ally of the state: the rational French consumer. Sauvy, who like Jean Monnet had grown up in a wine family, understood from direct experience that organized economic interests could influence government policy in support of their own goals. The impediments to growth had their roots not in weak consumer demand, in his view, but in this sort of interest-group politics. Specifically, neo-Malthusian pessimism was anchored in a political economy phenomenon characterized by the anticompetitive coordination of embedded interests. Those interests, including producers and distributors, but also labor, “reinforce their latent opposition and end up with restrictive ideas that are opposed to the general interest. The fear of excess takes form and leads to a destructive pessimism.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Sauvy saw the state playing a supporting role in these policies, and perceived economic actors working strategically to gain support from the state. Large producers, for example, might accept to limit their expansion in order to preserve small producers who were politically influential and could push for policies that sustained the rents in their sectors.[[56]](#footnote-56) Employers also struck a deal with organized labor that had pushed for a return to the pre-war 40 hour work week, a policy that Sauvy warned would force producers to reduce output.[[57]](#footnote-57) Sauvy’s political economy of economic retrenchment presaged a generation of academic scholarship that diagnosed France’s economic and policy schlerosis.[[58]](#footnote-58) His anxiety about a Malthusian restriction of supply was, as Charles Kindleberger notes, echoed in the analysis of France’s Ministry of Finance, which worried that “Industrialists and agriculturalists…are organized into coalitions [that] have as their purpose to maintain production at a relatively low level and to assure high prices for sale.”[[59]](#footnote-59)

French industry emerged from World War II embattled but determined. The active participation of France’s large producers in the Vichy project and their role in meeting of German production quotas left them politically compromised by the taint of collaboration, and they feared this weakened position would leave them open to control by the state. France’s early postwar economic policies, including De Gaulle’s initial nationalizations and the proposals of the Monnet Plan to take over banking and credit allocation, certainly looked to industry like a direct attack on their independence.[[60]](#footnote-60) They reignited the memory of the 1936 Matignon Accords imposed under the leftist government of Léon Blum. Those pro-labor regulations—including shorter work weeks, centralized wage bargaining, and worker representation with management—served as a reminder of what could happen if industry found itself weak and disorganized in the face of a concerted political project.[[61]](#footnote-61) Industry’s response to this threat from the state was to organize. In 1944, Léon Gingembre gathered small producers and independent retailers under the CGPME, over which he would maintain an iron control until 1978.[[62]](#footnote-62) In 1946, Henry Davezac, a graduate of Sciences Po and president of the electrical manufacturing union, created an umbrella group for all large French producers, the CNPF. The goal of these groups was explicitly to defend private firms against what Emmanuel Mayolle announced as the “interference of the state.”[[63]](#footnote-63)

For all of the concerns of France’s managerial class about being controlled by government policy, the French state also emerged from World War II weakened. The idea of the strong French state is a trope of French political economy, and French scholars have tended to trace a straight historical line from the pre-revolutionary Colbertist tradition to postwar economic planning.[[64]](#footnote-64) Yet historians of French industrial relations have also noted the ways in which French state has repeatedly been susceptible to capture by industry interests.[[65]](#footnote-65) At no time was that vulnerability greater than in the late 1940s, when the French state emerged from World War II in an especially weak condition. The economic mis-management of the 1930s, patent failure to defend the country from German invasion, and continued rationing after the war all pointed to a state that was unable to exercise effective authority. Early postwar policymakers especially worried that the French state, as it took the reins of industrial growth, would lose its autonomy to private corporatist interests.[[66]](#footnote-66) A similar concern drove de Gaulle’s push in his 1946 Bayeux speech to create a stronger executive for France, a model that would become the template for the constitution of the 5th Republic.[[67]](#footnote-67) Worse, the very centralization of power that was needed to guide the country through a rapid economic recovery was likely to exacerbate the pressures behind industry capture, leaving the French state even more vulnerable to a loss of autonomy.

The solution for Sauvy was not to eliminate the role of the state in the economy, but to direct policy toward a goal that would help to combat the influence of industry, namely toward increasing consumption. For Sauvy and other liberal planners, satisfying consumer demands was the whole point of economic planning. Sauvy writes: “The consumer reveals the needs that we must satisfy; it is he who should be the master of the economy…. It would be an error to imagine that the consumers simply follows production…The consumer does not follow, he leads.”[[68]](#footnote-68) Sauvy’s point was not that producers should be left to meet consumer demands, but that state policies should support industrialization so that *it* served consumer needs. A focus on consumers would help insulate the planning state from being captured (again, in Sauvy’s mind) by other economic interests. The focus on consumer interests would, he hoped, “avoid a return to state *dirigisme*.” He was clearly worried about business leaders influencing the planning process, but also about the misuse of planning to meet other social and welfare goals. “It is illogical,” he wrote, “to manage the economy based not only on the needs of consumers, but on the goal of full employment in a particular sector.”[[69]](#footnote-69) In order to avoid the interest group influence that led to restrictions on output and growth, France had to refocus economic policy on the interests of the consumer. And, since consumer interests were presumably relatively stable, focusing on them would allow business leaders to make rational long-term investments. Detecting and pursuing that interest therefore became a central question of postwar growth.

What was critical about this idea of consumer-led economic policy was the link that Sauvy made to France’s demographic crisis. Since the early 19th Century, French birth rates had been low, and the resulting stagnation in population had been seen as the cause of manifold economic and social woes. Sauvy was himself fascinated by population dynamics and went on in the 1950s to found and lead France’s Demographic Society. He attributed France’s loss in World War II to “demographic aging,” and he worried that a philosophy of slow growth could be self-reinforcing, with a “fear of excess” leading to pessimism about the possibilities for growth.[[70]](#footnote-70) The prospect of low growth in turn could discourage families from having more children, reinforcing the sense of pessimism. As Sauvy noted, “a reduction in births implies a certain fear of the future.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

These demographic ruminations allowed Sauvy to forge a rough coalition between Catholic conservatives and economic liberals. For him, demographic restriction (birth control) and economic restriction (restrained output) were two sides of the same Malthusian coin.[[72]](#footnote-72) His arguments against birth control were both eugenic and psychological. He worried that the most “evolved” families would be most likely to use birth control. And, with birth control, the single child would show “excessive egocentrism” and its parents “fear [when] faced with the least illness,” together creating “an absolutely deplorable psychological logic.”[[73]](#footnote-73) It was also, of course, a central concern for France’s Catholics. In the world of French neo-Malthusians, economic prosperity—i.e., an increase in output per capita—required that population be restricted. The emphasis on reducing childbirth by workers carried a particular anti-Socialist critique. The economist Joseph Garnie, a contemporary of Sauvy, warned that poor relief would reinforce this problem by giving working families an incentive to have more children than they could afford.[[74]](#footnote-74) It didn’t take much of an intellectual leap to connect this Malthusian critique of the welfare state to social-Darwinist concerns about the “dysgenic” consequences of un-natural selection.[[75]](#footnote-75)

For France’s Catholics, Sauvy offered a vision of economic policy that, because it envisioned unlimited consumption and therefore unlimited growth, was compatible with unrestrained population growth. There would be no need for birth control, nor any need for concern about pro-natalist welfare policies. So long as economic planning focused on the needs of consumers, and allowed those needs to set policy priorities, economic policymaking could be saved from anti-competitive economic interests that sought to restrict output in order to capture their share of rents. In this way, the idea of an independent consumer interest formed the basis for an alliance between Catholic social thinkers and advocates for a liberal version of economic planning that emphasized economic competition to promote growth.

## André Romieu and the Organized Consumer

Sauvy laid out an economic agenda that made consuming households the center of a liberal-Catholic coalition around economic planning and high growth. What he lacked was any genuine consumer organization to express that consumer interest in policy. André Romieu, a lawyer and bureaucrat in the Ministry of Economic Affairs who joined Fourrastier in *Commissariat general de productivité*, stepped in to fill that gap. Romieu was perhaps the only person within the new government who had practical experience organizing around consumer issues, and in 1951 he launched France’s first dedicated consumer association, the Federal Consumers’ Union (UFC). Romieu invited Sauvy to sit as an independent expert on its advisory board, but explained the purpose of this group in ways that echoed Fourastier’s analaysis: “The growth in productivity, whose goal is an increase in the quality of life, depends less today on technical progress in production than a more precise determination of the service to the final consumer and the spontaneous subordination to this imperative.”[[76]](#footnote-76) The UFC, in Romieu’s vision, would bring together associations that represented existing interests that also shared concerns about the conditions of consumption. Some of these included family and women’s groups who were already addressing consumer issues in the years prior to World War II. But he also drew into the group employer and labor groups, with the idea that all of these groups, together, could provide input on government consumer policies that would balance the concerns of different groups. The idea was not entirely new—it echoed the federated structure of the pre-war Confédération Générale des Consommateurs—but Romieu was unusually in emphasizing the alignment of consumer interests with those of employers and organized labor.

Consumer protection was not a natural inclination for either group. Producers argued that market competition would naturally generate consumer benefits, and that any organization of consumers could only impede that competition. Trade unions argued that fighting for better wages already *was* consumer protection, and that any organization around non-wage consumer benefits was a distraction. To the extent that unions had been willing to mobilize around consumer issues rather than worker issues, as with the 1919 *comités de vigilance*, these efforts had focused on confrontations with retailers whom they saw as both an economic rentier and a class enemy. Even as retail cooperatives of the interwar period moved to the left, embracing workers and opposing traditional retailers, France’s trade unions remained skeptical of a consumer identity that was different from workers’ status and priorities.[[77]](#footnote-77)

Romieu’s idea that the new consumer federation should include workers and employers had roots in his wartime experience, when he led the Paris Office of Social Committees, which in turn oversaw the creation and operations of firm-level consumer cooperatives.[[78]](#footnote-78) Such firm cooperatives were located on the premises of individual companies and sold mostly food products directly to workers. They were not a new form—the SNCF, for example, had run a chain of *économats* since the late 19th century. But French labor law restricted the ability of private firms to sell food or other products to their workers, and article 75 of the 1910 Code de Travail specifically banned company cafeterias. By the mid-1930s, a moment of widespread retail innovation, some companies and administrative agencies of the government began experimenting creating group buying organizations for their own members. With the retail crackdown in 1938, all buying groups were forced to re-organize as cooperatives. Further decrees of July and September 1939, immediately before Germany’s offensive against France, required that new enterprise cooperatives be financially independent from the company that created them and that they be approved by their local prefecture. [[79]](#footnote-79) Germany’s invasion of France coincided with the harvest season, and the resulting chaos rapidly plunged occupied France into food scarcity. What had started as more of an economic experiment to ease the time and pricing concerns of workers began to be adopted broadly among French firms hoping to assure adequate rations for their employees. [[80]](#footnote-80)

Initially, the scale of wartime firm cooperatives was limited. A study in the fall of 1941, for example, showed that only 2.5% of the French public had access to company cooperatives.[[81]](#footnote-81) In more industrial areas, however, and as the war progressed, their impact could be dramatic. A survey conducted in Saint-Pol-de-Léon, in Brittany, found that retail cooperatives had accounted for 16% of retail sales in 1937-193; by 1942, with the growth of enterprise cooperatives, that share had grown to almost 80%.[[82]](#footnote-82) In part in response to protests in worker communities that focused on rationing and access to food, the Vichy regime actively supported the creation of the new enterprise cooperatives, many of which were granted initial food stocks at the time of their launch.[[83]](#footnote-83) For sectors that were especially strenuous, like mining, supplemental worker rations were allocated directly to the producers, who then set up enterprise cooperatives in order to distribute them. [[84]](#footnote-84) Policies governing the cooperatives were also relaxed. For example, the strict financial separation from the firm imposed by the law of July 1939 was supposed to be enforced by workplace inspectors. Critics noted that this was far outside their normal inspection function and unlikely to occur. In August 1940, Minister of Industrial Production and Work Alexandre Parodi called on prefects to liberally grant companies the right to form consumer cooperatives, and on France’s workplace inspectors to overlook firm-level cooperatives that failed to meet requirements of the law.[[85]](#footnote-85) With these moves, enterprise cooperatives expanded more rapidly. For many producers, the new buying cooperatives offered an introduction to the challenges of modern retail.

Their importance for the nascent consumer interest was the role they played in educating both employers and organized labor about consumer issues. In October 1941, the Vichy government issued a *Charte de Travail* that sought to organize French production by introducing corporatist bodies that would smooth relations between labor and employers. In announcing the Charter, Maréchal Pétain called on firms to form social committees what would see to the many needs of workers beyond mere wages and working conditions. Because the functions of the social committees were never enumerated, their activities varied from firm to firm. Some ran health and child services, and organized food packages to be sent to workers who had been relocated to work in Germany. The most common activity was to ensure adequate food and supplies for their own workers. Of the roughly 9,000 social committees operating in 1943, 70% managed worker cantines, 25% ran company gardens, and about 50% operated enterprise cooperatives.[[86]](#footnote-86) All new firm cooperatives had to be created in liaison with the *comité sociaux*, which workers came to refer to as *comités patates*, or potato committees, for their role in feeding the workforce.[[87]](#footnote-87)

The enterprise cooperatives faced withering criticism from France’s small retailers. As with their critique of other new forms of distribution of the late 1930s, retailers attacked the company cooperatives for evading taxes that retailers had to pay, and for artificially raising prices and then offering sales on those higher prices.[[88]](#footnote-88) They also worried that companies were subsidizing their buying groups, and that the additional cost would be passed on in their products.[[89]](#footnote-89) Some of the company cooperatives began to sell products that were otherwise extremely rare, and became something of a black market.[[90]](#footnote-90) Also, most firm buying groups seem not to have been following the rules.[[91]](#footnote-91) Many did not register as cooperatives, and labor inspectors turned a blind eye. Finally, beleaguered retailers warned of social discord, argued that the company buying groups would create tensions among French workers, as some gained privileged access to food and others did not, thus harming social harmony “at a time when unity is so important.”[[92]](#footnote-92) Other critics noted that France already had too many stores, and that allowing new entrants was just going to make the oversupply worse. Defenders of the firm cooperatives rebutted that they were not equivalent in their function to retail stores: they offered lower prices not because of company subsidies but because they sold a limited number of products and provided no advice to consumers. [[93]](#footnote-93) With pushback from the General Committee on the Organization of Retail (CGOC), a new circular of 5 August 1942 revisited the question, and led to a new treatment of enterprise cooperatives that was friendlier to retailers. These were limited to firms with at least 500 workers. They also had to work through existing whole sellers rather than buying directly from producers, and the kinds of products they sold had to be specified in their authorization decision. A requirement that they be re-registered yearly was introduced to sunset the system of enterprise cooperatives once the war ended.[[94]](#footnote-94)

The activities of the social committees were overseen by a national Office of social committees, with a main office in Paris overseen by André Romieu, as well as departmental offices.[[95]](#footnote-95) The departmental branch offices, which offered modest salaries, were occupied mostly by ex-trade union members from the communist trade union CGT, which supplemented their salaries. These departmental representatives were often at odds with Romieu, who emerged from the Catholic corporatist tradition and had previously worked in the Catholic *Comité d’action corporative*, a group the trade union movement saw as anti-union and reactionary. In 1943, with support from the CGT, Labor Minister Hubert Largardelle attempted, unsuccessfully, to displace Romieu in favor of a more labor-friendly leader.[[96]](#footnote-96) With Romieu out of the way, Largardelle and the CGT hoped to push for a more formal role for the enterprise social committees in the management of the firm. In a tension that would dominate France’s postwar consumer movement, the labor groups saw organization around workers’s consumer identities as a means to get the state to help increase worker leverage with management. This view was antithetical to the approach advocated by Romieu, who saw consumer organization as representing a “third way” that avoided the flaws of liberalism while also obviating the need for direct state intervention in the economy.

Following the war, Romieu’s work on enterprise social committees landed him as head of the new *Bureau de la Consommation* formed within the *Direction des Programmes Economique* of the Ministry of National Economy.[[97]](#footnote-97) The project fell under Fourrastier’s *Commissariat general de productivité*, which from 1950 formed a range of subcommittees to deal with specific challenges impeding productivity gains, including the role of public marketplaces, agriculture, the artisan class, managerial training, worker organization in the company, and others.[[98]](#footnote-98) Alongside these it formed a commission that explicitly focused on consumption: the Commission on Retail, Consumption and Quality, headed by Paul Gros, who ran the acquisitions department for the SNCF. The goal of the commission was to address the provision of information to consumers, including the roles of labeling, standards, quality certificates, and comparative product tests. It recommended the formation of a technical body to survey household consumption, which in 1953 led to the creation of CREDOC. It also became the sponsor and initial source of financial support for Romieu’s new consumer federation, the Union Fédérale de la Consommation (UFC).[[99]](#footnote-99) With this financial backing and with broad associational support, Romieu launched the UFC in October 1951.

The idea of the UFC emerged from initial discussions that took place within UNAF, the Union of National Family Associations founded immediately after World War II to support family interests in reconstruction. Family and women’s associations participated in the discussions, as well as consumer cooperatives, and they reached out to Romieu for support.[[100]](#footnote-100) Following a study tour to the United States accompanied by UFCS vice-president Irène Mançaux, Romieu proposed forming an independent organization that would bring together the range of French associations that had concerns related to consumption.[[101]](#footnote-101) In addition to family and women’s groups, the idea received support from France’s largest catholic labor union, the CFTC. Their focus was traditionally on wages and dignity in work, and Romieu—drawing on Sauvy’s analysis—emphasized their shared interest in a non-Malthusian corporatism that would ensure “the development of a free economy, but one guided by consumers.”[[102]](#footnote-102) He also emphasized that the first quality labels developed in the U.S. were promulgated by labor unions to certify that adequate working conditions, and that France’s labor law included a provision for similar labels.[[103]](#footnote-103) The UFC’s mandate, as laid out in Article 2 of its founding statute, was notably diverse: “to undertake all actions oriented toward education, to organize for consumer defense, to represent its members both with the government and with private organizations.”[[104]](#footnote-104) As a federation, it did not represent individual consumers, but instead a group of member associations that included women’s groups, family groups, some labor unions, and consumer cooperatives. By 1955, the UFC had 24 member organizations from these various groups.[[105]](#footnote-105)

Romieu tied the new organization directly to the goals of postwar economic recovery. Through information to consumers, it would help bridge the “apparent contradiction between the needs of production (uniformity, series, constancy, guaranteed sales) and the desire of consumption (diversity, mobility, freedom to not buy).”[[106]](#footnote-106) More concretely, the UFC justified its existence in terms of its long-term benefit for French productivity. “The pursuit of a project of economic expansion and increasing the living standards (*niveau de vie*) in France requires a focus on choosing the most useful activities…in which consumers can only play their essential role to the extent that the are appropriately informed and armed.”[[107]](#footnote-107) It also explicitly made the link to democracy, on the grounds that an organized consumer base made mass production consistent with decentralized consumption, allowing what the UFC called “an authentic democratic economy.”[[108]](#footnote-108) This idea of a democratic economy harkened back to the third-way logic of Romieu’s wartime work with enterprise social committees. He saw consumers as “conduits to bypass considerations of function, class or party and to try to make a synthesis. Because they are close to the needs of men, they are driven to recreate a principle of unity in our economy characterized by antagonism, and are therefore a means toward order and progress.”[[109]](#footnote-109) This coordinating function was abetted by the French government, which afforded the UFC access to important policymaking forums for a range of issues related to consumption. The group was quickly invited to sit on the Economic Council, the Conseil superieur de commerce, and national industry councils. They also worked with France’s major product and food safety organization, the *Service de la repression des fraudes*, to define the allowable features of products, including jams and jellies, oysters, wool products and furs.[[110]](#footnote-110) They joined the *Institut des vins de consommation courante*, with the goal of cleaning up the wine market and improving its quality.[[111]](#footnote-111)

But the goal was also tied to the challenges associated with productivity growth. By creating a “permanent liaison” among groups interested in consumption, individual consumers could “participate by their actions in the growth in productivity,” thereby increasing France’s standard of living.[[112]](#footnote-112) It was a message that fit well with Fourastier’s priorities for the CGP, which was providing funds to launch and sustain the UFC in its early years.[[113]](#footnote-113) The main emphasis of this economic focus was in providing research and information on products. Consistent with its role as a point of contact for France’s consumer-related interests, the UFC’s early publications, including the *Bulletins d’Information* launched in 1951 and the later *Notes documentaires*, were both targeted at a consumer specialist or a consumer product management (*cadres de la consommation)* audience.[[114]](#footnote-114) Early product studies published in its *Informational Bulletins* included the sale of meat under cellophane (September 1952), fat content of milk (April 1953), imposed prices (November 1953), and knitting wool (February 1954).[[115]](#footnote-115) The studies were carefully researched, but, with a narrow focus on consumer policy professionals, reached a small audience. In 1956, the *Bulletin d’Information* had just 257 subscribers.[[116]](#footnote-116)

To broaden the audience for their research, the UFC launched a series of *How to Buy* (“Savoir Acheter”) brochures in 1955 that were intended for broader consumer distribution.[[117]](#footnote-117) The first, in 1955, was on textiles; subsequent printings treated detergents, meats, fruits and vegetables.[[118]](#footnote-118) The *How to Buy* series launched the UFC into direct-to-consumer information provision, and they quickly embraced it. In 1956, the UFC organized the *Journée du consommateur* at the Salon des Arts Menagers, focused on the theme “applying science to life.”[[119]](#footnote-119) Echoing strategies of contemporary women’s magazines, they also began publishing recipes in the Salon’s monthly review, *Art Menager*.[[120]](#footnote-120) The addition of direct-to-consumer publishing helped their finances. In 1955, they had 24 member organizations, two permanent delegates and two secretarial staff, 100,000 active members and 200,000 “correspondent” members. Of their total budget of almost 15 million francs, 300,000 came from member fees, 1 million from sales of the *Information Bulletin*, and 2 million from sales of their *How to Buy*, brochures. The remaining 70% of their support came from the CGP.[[121]](#footnote-121)

The turning point in this move to provide direct consumer information came in September 1957, when the UFC under Romieu launched a daily information dispatch that reported on market conditions at Paris’s central wholesale market, Les Halles. Called *Conseils quotidiens pour menageres parisiennes*, or Daily advice for Parisian housewives, the short spot was broadcast at 8am as part of the radio show *Journal Parlé*, presumably in time for women to use the information in their food shopping. This information was based on early morning visits to Les Halles by a representative of the UFC, accompanied by the *Inspecteurs de la police economique*, who oversaw the market. They reported high and low prices for different products, and pointed out those products that were most attractive in terms of price. The focus was on perishable goods, ones that may change day-to-day. What was abundant, at what price? From 1959, the UFC also contributed to *Radio Parlé* at 8:00pm information for the markets the following morning, including fishing catches from that day that would make it to the market the following morning. They also generated a report to the newspapers, called *Météo de la menagère*, or Weather report for the housewife, that was distributed by France-Presse.[[122]](#footnote-122) Romieu, who did his own announcements, and went by the radio name Mr. Menu, compared it to helicopter-based traffic reporting.[[123]](#footnote-123) By pushing demand toward more abundant products, it should keep down inflation.[[124]](#footnote-124)

Romieu’s UFC drew in new organizations, with an associational membership that peaked at 36 participating associations by the mid-1950s. But as consumer policymaking became more prominent, the UFC also began losing some of its founding members. In 1954, the retail cooperatives left the UFC to create their own product testing lab, the *Laboratoire Cooperatif d’Analyses et de Recherches* (Labo-Coop).[[125]](#footnote-125) And, as the UFC attempted to consolidate its role as a central voice for consumer concerns, this pushed away other groups. In November 1956, the UFC called on its member organizations to recognize the UFC as presenting the single voice of consumer groups in discussions with the government. The family association FNCC rejected this, arguing it would weaken their role protecting consumers, and pointing out that they already had 2.8 million family members, while the UFC had few individual members. They simultaneously pulled out of the UFC.[[126]](#footnote-126) Other groups that remained, like the UFCS, also complained that the UFC was expanding beyond its original coordinating role, and requested, for example, that the UFC stop communicating directly with their own members rather than going through the head office.[[127]](#footnote-127)

Romieu put special effort into wooing labor unions to join. His arguments were mostly economic, and seemingly naive. He emphasized that consumer and union interests were naturally aligned, for example, since, as Sauvy had argued, only with a proper understanding of consumer needs could full employment be achieved.[[128]](#footnote-128) The main factor that seems to have convinced unions to take consumer issues seriously was the willingness of the French government to give consumer groups a voice in important economic policy forums. But the importance of that access, which the UFC sought to control, also meant that labor unions were not going to be satisfied for long with expressing their views via the UFC. In 1959, four of France’s unions pulled out of the UFC and banded together to form a new labor-oriented consumer group, the *Organisation général de la consommation* (ORGECO). With its formation the Catholic labor union UFTC, which had been present at the founding of Romieu’s organization, also quit the UFC. ORGECO launched in 1959 but, with little serious consideration about what activities to pursue, began work only in 1961, with a decision to follow the work of *Labo-Coop* and focus on conducting comparative tests. It saw these as “a stimulant for producers, a way to shine the light on certain failings of their commercial services, or further to attract producer attention to the differences in quality of European products.”[[129]](#footnote-129) It’s first product tests included yoghurt, butter and margarine, white goods, and textiles.[[130]](#footnote-130) UFC relations with ORGECO and with the cooperatives’ Labo-Coop remained cordial, and when the UFC launched its own product test magazine, *Que Choisir?*, in 1961, they included test results from both Labo-Coop and ORGECO.[[131]](#footnote-131)

## Jean Fourastier and Consumer Productivity

The third voice for the role of consumers in early postwar France was Jean Fourastier, the administrative head of the Productivity Commission (CGP) from which Romieu had launched his UFC. Trained at the *Ecole libre des sciences politiques*, the antecedent to today’s *Sciences Po*, he had worked for the government as an insurance commissioner in the 1930s and joined the Committee on the organization of insurance under Vichy.[[132]](#footnote-132) With the end of the war, he was swept into the administration that would help to channel U.S. funds into productivity projects in France. The result of this effort would be a generation of unprecedented economic growth in France that Fourastier himself later described as *les trentes glorieuses*.[[133]](#footnote-133) Like Sauvy, Fourastier provided an optimistic response to the neo-Malthusian critique of fast growth. Far more than just the size of France’s market, what mattered for Fourastier was the *quality* of consumption. He grappled with what productivity might mean in the context of household economics and concluded that more efficient purchases rested on three kinds of reforms. These reforms amounted to a rationalization of household consumption that meshed with the prevailing postwar Catholic-labor consensus that emphasized the professionalization of women’s work *inside* the household. France’s female labor participation rate, which peaked at .54 in 1920, was .47 at the end of World War II and declined to .38 by 1950.[[134]](#footnote-134) Fourastier’s conclusion was that if productivity in the workplace was important, so was productivity in household consumption, and he saw postwar inflation as one indicator of this low productivity.

His first priority was rational family budgeting. Households had to make optimal decisions about how to allocate their income across different kinds of products. This implied better training in economics and home economics. One piece of the solution was better consumer education, and he proposed the creation of a *Centre Technique de la Consommation* to address this need – a proposal that presaged the National Consumption Institute (INC) that would be created in the 1960s.[[135]](#footnote-135) Household equipment was also an important part of his vision for consumer productivity. He placed particular weight on the salutary benefits of refrigeration. Household refrigeration would allow consumers to purchase in bulk when prices were low, thus lessening the incentives by wholesalers and retailers to speculate—a charge that had been leveled at French retailers since the pre-revolutionary period.[[136]](#footnote-136) In part because of poor electricity distribution, and in part due to inadequate consumer credit financing options, French households were especially slow to adopt new kitchen technologies. In 1962, only 40 percent of households had a refrigerator, and only 30% had a washing machine.[[137]](#footnote-137) His second priority was greater transparency about product quality and price. Fourastier emphasized the link to inflation, noting that pricing transparency in particular would allow consumers “to buy when prices are lowest.” His third priority was on accessible consumer credit. Whereas many observers warned that consumer credit would drive demand and inflation, Fourastier felt it could help to hold prices down. With credit, he argued, consumers could stock up at moments when prices were low. Fourastier was a strong supporter of liberal consumer credit terms in the early 1950s, although this policy was reversed in the mid-1950s with the imposition of controls on the terms of sale credit as part of a broader effort to manage inflation.[[138]](#footnote-138)

While this focus on the household was important, Fourastier also felt that consumers could only act efficiently if the retail distribution system did not hold them back. But he struggled with the problem of increasing productivity in retail, which he felt was being impeded by two specific obstacles. One was the role of local market syndicates that policed prices in public markets and punished retailers who sold at low prices—so-called *casseurs*—either by assigning them stalls in bad locations within the market or even by refusing to sell them stalls at all. The second problem came from government restrictions that placed limits on innovations in retailing. Fourastier especially criticized the government’s prewar and wartime restrictions to protect small retailers. Fourastier was especially critical of the prewar ban on *prix uniques* and *camions bazaar*, which he saw as a “Malthusian” law that blocked retail innovation.[[139]](#footnote-139) While France would later become a leader in large-scale retail formats, with global leaders like Carrefour and Leclerc, retailers in the late 1940s were broadly perceived as economically backward. Self-service stores only appeared in France in 1948, and the first supermarkets would not appear until 1958.[[140]](#footnote-140) Most food stores at the time lacked basic refrigeration. Protected from consolidation, France had too many stores, which kept profits in the retail sector low, and left little capacity to make new business investments. The consequence was that price reductions coming from productivity gains in manufacturing were being absorbed as rents by an inefficient distribution system. His proposal, embedded in the *plan Monnet*, was therefore to break the pricing stranglehold of traditional retailers.[[141]](#footnote-141)

High prices and food scarcity in the late 1940s led to a new wave of group buying organizations that had a variety of sources. Some enterprise cooperatives remained in the wake of the war, and despite promises to not renew their licenses after the end of the war, they were gradually shut down starting only in 1950. A survey of firm and administrative buying groups in 1953 found only 2,700, and a visit to one of them revealed facilities that were simple and run-down, with only 20 items for sale.[[142]](#footnote-142) At the same time, new “fake cooperatives” emerged that operated as direct purchasing groups but falsely sold themselves as cooperatives.[[143]](#footnote-143) The Association of Consumers and Users (ACU) in Neuilly-sur-Seine formed as a buying group in in 1948. Like the prewar buying groups, members paid 200 francs to join and received a 20-30% price reduction on basic foods, including meat, butter, eggs, cheese, oil, sugar and others. By 1955 it had 850 member families.[[144]](#footnote-144) The family associations FNAPF and UFCS both encouraged the creation of new local buying groups through the country. Many of these groups survived into the 1970s, when they were absorbed into the country’s expanding national consumer association.

Fourastier was skeptical that such collective buying schemes could ease the pricing pressure from traditional retailing. Instead, he emphasized the need for modernization of the existing retail and distribution system. He thought that a national cold chain, for example, in which food remained under refrigeration all the way from the farm producer to the household, would help eliminate the market power of economic middlemen. For meats, the cold chain would allow for slaughtering at the point of production, which would limit the ability of urban slaughterhouses to ration meat in order to maintain high prices. He also argued for a rationalization of retailing itself, but a modernization driven by traditional retailers. One solution was to gather them together in commercial centers that would offer consumers a single access point for the whole range of goods they sought. The template was the grand magasin, except that independent retailers would run each of the departments. By the mid-1950s, such centers had already formed in some of France’s provincial cities, including Tours (the “Passage de Tours”), Buebwiller, Mulhouse, and Limoges.[[145]](#footnote-145) But these commercial centers highlighted a key conceptual problem with retail modernization with which France’s economic planners struggled. By bringing together individual shops in one place that was accessible by car – a move that would give consumers greater convenience – one also eliminated competition among retailers that would hold down price. The solution, Fourastier concluded, was either price fixing by the state, which he opposed, or the construction of active consumer groups that could police retail prices.[[146]](#footnote-146)

Initial efforts to force rationalization of this kind onto retailers focused on direct manipulation of taxation. The *patente*, a local tax paid by retailers, was progressively increased. France also introduced a value added tax (VAT) that not only required more detailed reporting of store accounts, and hence limited opportunities for tax evasion, but also allowed firms to skip taxes on capital outlays. For the retail sector, the VAT put a hand in the fiscal scale in favor or larger, more capital intensive distributors, to the detriment of small independent retailers.[[147]](#footnote-147) Retailers were also forced to join, and make contributions to, France’s new social security scheme. For independent retailers, who had traditional relied on the sale of their shop to finance their retirement, the new social benefit looked like an additional tax. But the French state had over-estimated how much leverage it had over independent retailers, and France’s independent retailers responded to this assault on their livelihoods by mobilizing. In 1953, the bookseller Pierre Poujade launched a tax strike in his home town of Sain-Céré (Lot) that quickly spread to most of France. Poujade’s rise was rapid. By 1955, his movement to promote traditional sectors in France, the Union for the Defense of Retailers and Artisans (UDCA), had gathered 400,000 members. When Poujade threw his support behind the French Popular Party (PPF), they won 11% of the national vote in the 1956 elections.[[148]](#footnote-148) Yet his fall was almost equally precipitous. Once in power, he turned on de Gaulle, and his supporters, who were dominated by Gaullists, abandoned him. This collapse, occurring just as retail modernization was beginning in earnest in France, left traditional retailers without little recourse. It was in that context that many small shopkeepers turned to a new set of local consumer groups to help weave a viable path through modernization.

## Experiments with Retail-Consumer Coordination

Many of the groups they reached out to had their roots before World War II in a movement to promote women’s expertise. The idea traced its roots to a Catholic project of the 1930s that sought, during a period of high unemployment, to bring women back into the home by professionalizing work in the house. Supported by the rise of home economics training, new household equipment, and Paulette Bernege’s ideas about the optimization of household tasks, the UFCS launched the Ligue de la Mère au Foyer to encourage and support women working at home.[[149]](#footnote-149) They successfully lobbied for France’s *allocation familiale*, a pro-natalist welfare transfer intended to top up salaries for *familles nombreuses*, to be increased when a housewife opted not to work.[[150]](#footnote-150) They also promoted the idea of the homemaker as a profession with specific expertise. Trade unions, who hoped to lure housewives out of the work place, endorsed the idea of women’s work in the house as embodying expertise analogous to shop floor skills. Through the 1950s, the UFCS continued to be an advocate for professionalization of the household, and in the winter of 1956 the UFCS organized its first *Journées de la bonne acheteuse*. Women who completed the session received a “good shopper card.” A brochure for the program explained “By your wise purchase, you contribute, to a large extent, to improving the standard of living of your family and of the whole of France.”[[151]](#footnote-151) This linking of consumer savvy with national economic success became the foundation for a set of regional projects that emerged in the early 1950s to help control inflation and manage consumer-retail relations. These experiments helped to institutionalize the idea that critical technical expertise necessary to properly managing product markets resided with household consumers.

In 1950, after her study tour to the United States with André Romieu, Irène Mançaux, vice president of the UFCS, proposed the creation of local groups of “femmes acheteuses.” The pilot program was launched in Lyon, where a Ligue de la Mère au Foyer had already existed from before the war. Initially, the group’s activity was limited to recording precise accounts of their household spending. In 1952, as worries about inflation rose, Pierre Massenet, Prefect of the Rhone department, proposed the creation of a Retail-Consumer Conciliation Committee (Comité d’entente commerce-consommateurs). The idea, proposed by the state-sponsored Departmental Union of Family Associations—which the UFCS had refused to join—was to bring consumers, workers and employers together to promote better information about product markets and pricing.[[152]](#footnote-152) With help from UFCS volunteers, the committee assembled daily lists of products sold at market and the best prices they found for them. The lowest prices they found for “good quality products” were then distributed every Thursday by radio and via the local press.[[153]](#footnote-153) Women also reported each week the budget for a family of five.[[154]](#footnote-154) Their price information became the basis for a price labeling scheme, in which retailers could market products that met the average (“indicative”) or best price from the survey by employing special colored stickers.[[155]](#footnote-155) The consumer representatives to the Committee also received complaints from consumers and worked with their counterparts in the retail sector to resolve them. The committee, which became a template for similar projects in an estimated 40 cities across France, was praised for holding prices down, and for creating “an atmosphere of mutual understanding between researchers and consumers.”[[156]](#footnote-156)

The Lyon liaison “Commerce-Consommation” extended its goals beyond mere price surveillance. They were credited with helping retailers transform their businesses to keep up with the evolving demands of consumers. They helped some failing bakeries to transform into retailers that sold basic consumer goods: radios, baby product, even hair styling, or goods that were used for travel. In some cases, meetings with consumer groups convinced local retailers to shift to self-service format. In other cases, the committees helped to advocate frozen foods, to help with sales of foods that were in over-supply, or to advocate for distinctive local products. They participated in radio broadcasts that announced products that were in surplus and therefore “momentarily advantageous,” and including their recommended price.[[157]](#footnote-157)

The Comité d’entente idea from Lyon spread first to Lille, Strasbourg, Toulouse and Grenoble, and then ultimately to Paris. Their activities varied by region, but most undertook similar projects to the liaison group in Lyon. The comités de liaison in Grenoble, Reims, Strasbourg, and Lille all gave radio emissions on products that were temporarily abundant along with a survey of prices.[[158]](#footnote-158) In Vitry-le-François, the lowest prices found by consumer committee were posted in the local market for consumer reference.[[159]](#footnote-159) The Consumer liaison committee in Mulhouse worked with retailers to help to commercialize the local breed of Sungau chickens.[[160]](#footnote-160) In Paris, the Conseil de Clientele de l’Alimentation Parisienne, in which unions will also participated, combined product information for consumers with consumer surveys to collect and share their opinions on products.[[161]](#footnote-161) In other cities, the local consumer-retail committees also invited representatives of industry and even the media to join them.

One of the most ambitious of these spin-offs appeared in Alsace. The Consumer Association of the Haut-Rhin (ACOHR, “L’Association des Consommateurs Haut-Rhinois), launched in November 1953 under joint impetus from family associations and local trade associations. Like many similar groups around France, they began by conducting price surveys, with special attention to butchers and grocers. In one of its first collective efforts, for example, ACOHR organized 100 consumers to survey butchers in Mulhouse. Participating housewives each asked for 100 grams of rumpsteak. They then recorded the price, noted which stores had labeled prices, and which stores actually sold rumpsteak or recommended another cut of beef.[[162]](#footnote-162) What was new about ACOHR’s strategy was that it also reached out to a small group of retailers who agreed to commit to a common code of practice (*code de loyauté*). The code focused on issues of quality and pricing, with a special emphasis on getting retailers to post prices in their display windows, at a time when posting of prices was both uncommon and not legally required. Participating stores indicated compliance by displaying an ACOHR signboard in their window. ACOHR in turn took out advertisements in the local paper that explained their code of practice and listed participating stores. For participating retailers, ACOHR became a means to differentiate themselves as consumer-friendly. They posted signs, for example, that read: “Buy only in shops that display their prices.” The group also gave retailers a channel to get information to consumers. In one effort, in the summer of 1954, participating grocers coordinated to offer sales on specific products, like peaches and plums. Another example was their campaign, reminiscent of the social buying clubs of a generation earlier, encouraging consumers to do their Christmas shopping early.[[163]](#footnote-163)

Mostly these schemes applied to small retailers, especially in the food sectors. But France’s large stores also embraced the idea of the expert consumer, although on a store-by-store basis. Starting in 1953, many of France’s *grands magasins* as well as retail chains formed customer advisory groups (*conseils de clientele*). Drawing from members of local family and women’s groups, including the UFCS, they gave feedback on choice of products to sell, on sales techniques, or the organization of the store, even on opening hours.[[164]](#footnote-164) One common practice was to rely on the consumer advisory group to help select clothing for the upcoming summer and winter collections. Some asked their consumer advisors to evaluate samples of potential products on a scale of 1-10, the results of which they either employed for making purchase decisions or even passed back to producers. Others allowed their consumer advisors to take products home and use them, then report back. And, like the local consumer-retail groups, the customer advisory councils were found not just in Paris: they began to appear across France’s larger cities, including Villefranche, Nimes, Nantes, Lyon, and others. In one case, this sort of consultation even extended to a retail association. In 1954, in an effort to promote paper and plastic packaging, the association of the French food packaging industries formed a “Study and liaison committee” that included prominent consumer representatives (the UFC and Conseil national des femmes), regulators (AFNOR and Répression des Fraudes) and industry groups (Société de la Cellophane and the retailer BHV).[[165]](#footnote-165) The UFC observed that, for the first time, “retailers have admitted that they don’t always know what consumers want, and that they should give them a voice.”[[166]](#footnote-166)

These mostly-local consumer-retail liaisons arose primarily in response to pressures from departmental prefects to deal with inflation. But they also responded to a growing criticism of France’s retail sector, one that Fourastier had emphasized in his work on productivity, that retailers were keeping prices up even as producers were increasing productivity and driving costs down. This “distortion,” as it was called, had to be caused by a lack of productivity growth in retailing to match productivity gains in manufacturing. [[167]](#footnote-167) In 1954, Conseil Superieur du Commerce formed a Commission Liaisons Productions-Commerce-Consommation, that would focus on the role of retailers in promoting productivity, and appointed André Romieu, who was still running the UFC, to head it. The Commission’s purpose was to make preparations for France’s *États Generaux du Commerce*, a meeting that took place every seven years, and whose theme for 1955 was to be the role of retail in promoting productivity.[[168]](#footnote-168) Not surprisingly, the Estates General vaunted the promise of the new consumer-retailer liaisons. While they had no authority to encourage retailers to act, M. Barrier, president of the CSC, began to advocate for organized meetings of retailers, consumers and producers. He called them *liaisons production-commerce-consommation*. They would, he argued, help producers “recognize the real needs of consumers.” [[169]](#footnote-169)

The collegial nature of the consumer-retailer liaisons, without a strong role for the state, clearly fit well with André Romieu’s conception of a corporatist third way for France, and it was with his attention and support that they came to be publicly embraced. Romieu’s consumer association, the UFC, had for several years worked with the local comités de liaison to help them identify local consumer partners they would work with.[[170]](#footnote-170) His support, along with renewed concern about inflation, led to a formalization of the legal status of the local committees. In March 1959, the Minister of the Interior issued a circular asking departmental prefects to institutionalize what it dubbed *comiteés d’entente*. A subsequent letter from Pierre Chatenet, Minister of the Interior, to departmental prefects in August 1959 encouraged them to “instantly” launch new consumer-retailer liaisons, with the goal of “assuring a harmonious development of market activities and of living standards for the population by an effort to adapt as well as possible production and services to the demands of consumers.”[[171]](#footnote-171) He also laid out a standardized and elaborate formal structure for the new committees, including tripartite retailer-producer-consumer “committee offices,” temporary working groups, a press liaison office, and a printed “bulletin de liaison” to be distributed by unions, family associations and other civil society groups. Formal notes of their meetings were to be passed to the Interior Ministry.[[172]](#footnote-172) By August of 1959, there were 12 such committees around France, several in Paris, and 11 new ones in the process of formation.[[173]](#footnote-173) A year later, in the early fall of 1960, there were an estimated 40 of these groups, half of which were reportedly extremely active.[[174]](#footnote-174) But the surge in liaison group formation clearly put pressure on the local offices of France’s nascent consumer groups. The UFCS, for example, which by 1961 was working with retailer liaison committees in Lille, Lyon, Strasbourg, and Toulouse, reported that its local representatives were, in addition to their other activities, attending weekly meetings with retailer associations.[[175]](#footnote-175) They also reported a lack of sufficient preparation by some members of the committees, insufficient rigor in discussions, and inadequate coordination across the committees.[[176]](#footnote-176)

In 1960, in preparation for the Fourth Plan, the Commissariat Général du Plan launched its first working group with a mandate to look at consumer issues. It was inspired by the local liaison committees, and dealth with consumer-retailer-producer relations. André Romieu, ever at the center of new consumer initiatives, was tapped to head the working group. At its first meeting, Romieu argued that the local consumer-retail liaison groups “offer a means of acting both on the practices of retailers and on the habits and behavior of consumers.”[[177]](#footnote-177) It was exactly the kind of win-win arrangement that appealed to his corporatist aesthetic. But it also signaled the beginning of a much more direct government role in consumer markets: to promote local consumer groups, to provide product information for consumers, and to encourage consumer input into all areas of government policy. This entrance of the French state into consumer field took place over the course of the 1960s, and is taken up in the following chapter.

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The 1950s in France saw the rise of direct engagement with consumers both by the French state and by retailers. In each case, that engagement arose as a consequence of postwar planning. But the path from economic planning to consumer organization was plural. France’s postwar apostles of consumption identified three problems to which they saw consumer organization as a response. The first problem, emphasized especially by Alfred Sauvy, was the risk that new planning powers arrogated to the state would lead French industry to capture those powers for their own interests. In particular, they would use them to coordinate ouput restrictions that would keep production low and prices high. The answer, Sauvy argued, was to target planning at the consumer welfare, and to encourage consumer input into economic policymaking. A second problem for France’s planning technocrats was that successful growth in productivity raised concerns about the willingness and ability of French consumers to adapt their consumption patterns to new fordist modes of production. Would consumer demand rise with increasing output? Would their product preferences shift to meet the new kinds of supply from mass production? Both Jean Fourastier and André Roumier argued that a positive answer to these questions depended on the education and organization of consumer interests. Finally, Fourastier in particular worried that inefficiencies in retailing might impede consumers from reaping the benefits of productivity gains in manufacturing. Even as production costs fell, retail inefficiencies meant that consumer prices continued to rise. This anti-modernization critique of traditional retailers led them to approach France’s nascent consumer organizations in order to coordinate around product pricing and sales practices. Taken together, these three channels linked the rise of France’s nascent consumer interest directly back to the expanded powers of the French state in the form of indicative planning.

1. While this transition signals the start of ongoing negotiations over the nature and defence of the consumer interest, we limit this account to the period of interest formation, which was completed by the mid-1980s. Gunnar Trumbull, *Consumer Capitalism: Politics, Product Markets and Firm Strategy in France and Germany* (Cornell University Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 103-130; Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through 20th-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2005), 336-375. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 69-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Helen V. Milner, *Interests, Institutions, and Information: Domestic Politics and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Alain Touraine, *La société post-industrielle : naissance d'une société* (Paris: Denoël, 1969); Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978); Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (New York: Sage Publishing, 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mark Grannovetter, “Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness,” *American Journal of Sociology* 91, no. 3 (1985), 481-510. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Richard Swedberg, *Principles of Economic Sociology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Jens Beckert, *Beyond the Market: The Social Foundations of Economic Efficiency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Marion Fourcade, *Economists and Societies: Discipline and Profession in the United States, Britain, and France, 1890s-1990s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: MacMillan, 1999); Pierre Bordieu, *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979); Jean Baudrillard, *Le Société de la consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970); Alya Guseva and Akos Rona-Tas, *Plastic Money: Constructing Markets for Credit Cards in Eight Postcommunist Countries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Rawi Abdelal, *National Purpose in the World Economy: Post-Soviet States in Comparative Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Keith Darden, *Economic Liberalism and its Rivals: The Formation of International Institutions Among the Post-Soviet States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Judith Goldstein “Ideas, Institutions, and American Trade Policy,” *International Organization* 42 (1988), 179-217; Kathleen McNamara, *The Currency of Ideas: Monetary Politics in the European Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Mark Blythe, *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the 20th Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Craig Parsons, *A Certain Idea of Europe:* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Social Studies Association, 1944); John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1958). Later scholarship linked traced national consumer culture to specific economic and political configurations. Juliet B. Schor, *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don’t Need* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Patricia L. MacLaughlan, *Consumer Politics in Postwar Japan: The Institutional Boundaries of Citizen Activism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The literature on mobilization is extensive. I offer only seminal names in order to clarify the scope of each category. See: Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); Suzanne Berger, *Peasants Against Politics: Rural Organization in Britany, 1911-1967* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Collective Action, Social Movements and Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Douglas McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This literature is also extensive. See: Peter Hall, *Governing the Economy: The Politics of State Intervention in Britain and France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Peter Hall and David Sokice, eds., Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Suzanne Berger and Ronal Dore, *National Diversity and Global Capitalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); John Zysman, *Governments, Markets and Growth: Financial Systems and the Politics of Industrial Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Peter Katzenstein, *Small States in World Markets: Industrial Policy in Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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17. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Polanyi’s backlash theory became a powerful account of economic interest formation in general, and serves as the backdrop for a state-centered account of the postwar rise of the new French consumer interest. But if the early half of the twentieth century featured a regulatory backlash in which too much market eliciting a countermovement from the state, as Polanyi has suggested, the second half of the century showcased a contrary dynamic, in which the growing power of the state eliciting a backlash from markets. Mark Blyth, *Great Transformations: Economic Ideas and Institutional Change in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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20. Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State?: Reagan, Thatcher and the Politics of**Retrenchment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Theta Scokpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009), 57-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 107-109. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Andrea Campbell, *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 129-130. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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25. Louise A. Tilly, “The Food Riot as a Form of Political Conflict in France,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2, no. 1 (Summer, 1971), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
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29. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Kathleen Thelen, *How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan* (Camridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ira Katzneltson, “Periodization and Preferences: Reflections on Purposive Action in Comparative Historical Social Science,” in James Mohoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds., *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 270-303. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Wade Jacoby, *The Enlargement of the European Union and NATO: Ordering from the Menu* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981),172. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Alfread Sauvy, *La Prévision économique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1943), 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Georges Blanc, *Le Consommateur dans l’Organisation de l’économie: Consommation Libre ou Consommation Dirigée* (Paris: Librairie generale de droit et de jurisprudence, 1945. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The Commissariat general du plan has received wide academic attention. See Peter Hall, *Governing the Economy: The Politics of State Intervention in Britain and France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Marie-Laure Djelic, *Exporting the American Model: The Postwar Transformation of European Business* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Andrew Shonfield, *Modern Capitalism: The Changing Balance of Public and Private Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
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41. “Vie des mouvements,” *Bulletin D’information* *(UFC)* 4, no. 7 (September-October 1956), 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. AN 81AJ/176, M. Fourastié, Groupe de Travail de la Productivité, M. Allais, “Pouvons-Nous Atteindre les Hauts niveaux de vie Americains?”, c1948, Section V, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy*, 2nd ed., 325 (Cited in B. A. Corry, “Malthus and Keynes – A Reconsideration,” *The Economic Journal* 68, no 276 (1859), 721.) [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Cited in Jean Baptiste Say, *Letters to Thomas Robert Malthus on Political Economy and Stagnation of Commerce* (London, 1821), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. William J. Baumol, “Retrospectives: Say’s Law,” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 13, no. 1 (1999), 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Jean Baptiste Say, *Letters to Thomas Robert Malthus on Political Economy and Stagnation of Commerce* (London, 1821), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. It is a fascinating footnote in European economic history that Malthus both drew his inspiration from and had his most profound impact on French, rather than British, economic debates. Malthus’s own thinking seems to have been deeply influenced by France’s 18th Century physiocrats—François Quesnay, physician to Mme. Pompadour, and his student Dupont de Nemours—who were skeptical of state-led industrial policies and emphasized the value of agriculture. Malthus felt that while industrial workers would not consume beyond bare necessities, agricultural workers, in part because they were poor, could be expected to create new demand. This French-inspired insight was important because it became the basis for an intellectual case for free trade, first in England, and later in post-World War II France. Malthus, who had initially supported protectionism under the Corn Laws, later shifted to support free trade on the grounds that it would allow Britain to exchange its excess industrial goods for foreign agricultural outputs that would find adequate demand at home. In postwar France, a similar Malthus-inspired anxiety over inadequate domestic demand created the platform for a broad liberal-Catholic coalition in support of a common European market. Samuel Hollander, “On Malthus’s Physiocratic References,” History of Political Economy 24, no. 2 (1992), 370-371; Thomas Sowell, “The General Glut Controversy Reconsidered,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 15, no. 3 (1963), 196; Yves Charbit, *Economic, Social and Demographic Thought in the XIXth Century: The Population Debate from Malthus to Marx* (New York: Springer, 2009), 101; Samuel Hollander, “Malthus’s Abandonment of Agricultural Protectionism: A Discovery in the History of Economic Thought,” *American Economic Review* 82, no. 3 (1992), 650-651. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
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49. Kenneth Mouré, *Managing the franc under Poincaré*??? (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 8. (from Dobbin) [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Frank R. Dobbin, “The Social Construction of the Great Depression: Industrial Policy during the 1930s in the United States, Britain, and France,” *Theory and Society* 22, No. 1 (1993), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. J. Vialatoux, “La These Malthusienne devant l’epreuve de la crise,” *Les Études philosophiques* 6, nos. 2-3 (September 1932), 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Alice Buttner, “L’Abaissement du prix de revient dans le commerce de detail,” Doctoral Thesis presented to the Law Faculty at the University of Paris, (Paris: Éditions A. Pedone, 1936), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. François Crouzet, “The Historiography of French Economic Growth in the Nineteenth Century,” *Economic History Review* 56, no. 2 (2003), 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Alfred Sauvy, “Le Malthusianisme Anglo-Saxon,” *Population* 2, no. 2 (April – June 1947), 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Alain Berger, “Sortir du Malthusianisme Éconmique,” *Esprit* 210 (January 1954), 24; also Charles Kindleberger, “Postwar Resurgence of the French Economy,” in Stanley Hoffmann et al., eds., *In Search of France: The Economy Society, and Political System in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Alfred Sauvy, “’Maturité Économique’ et Malthusianisme,” *Revue économique* 1, no. 2 (July 1950), 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Guy Palmade (Capitalisme et capitalistes français au XIXe, Paris: 1961) argued that a Malthusian tendancy in French capitalism had caused France to modernize slowly. Stanley Hoffman, et al. eds., *In Search of France* (New York: 1963, p. 17) diagnosed France’s Third Republic has having “more breaks than motor.” Michel Crozier (The Bureaucratic Phenomenon, Chicago: 1964) traced France’s lack of dynamism to a sort of organizational pathology in which bureaucratic norms trumped effective governance. Sauvy’s political economy logic was more overtly political, with an account that would later be reprised by Mancur Olson in his *The Rise and Decline of Nations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Pierre Lalumieère, *L’Inspection des finances* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959, p 194, cited in Charles Kindleberger, “Postwar Resurgence of the French Economy,” in Stanley Hoffmann et al., eds. *In Search of France: The Economy Society, and Political System in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
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63. Béatrice Touchelay, “L’INSEE et le CNPF de 1946 a 1961: lhistoire d’une alliance modernisatrice*,” Le Mouvement social* 191 (April-June 2000), 30; Richard Vinen, *Bourgeois Politics in France, 1945-1951* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Andrew Shonfield, *Modern Capitalism: The Changing Balance of Public and Private Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969; Peter Hall, *Governing the Economy* (Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
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66. Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 259; [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
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